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DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD

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EDITOR'S NOTE

WHAT'S NEXT?

THE EARLY PART OF EACH SUMMER garners special attention for anyone working in video games. For years, it was the impending meteor strike of E3 that caused the hyperfocus. But now that the long-running event has finally called it quits, the industry that once swarmed to attend feels like it's still insistent on making the pilgrimage to Los Angeles, like butterflies or birds following the clarion call of migration.

That's generally good news for anyone who is eager to learn what's coming up next for the gaming hobby, as we inevitably receive a bevy of new announcements, reveals, and accompanying visuals. We've made a point to set aside extra space this month to celebrate that wealth of new info. Expect to find a lot of previews highlighting some of the things we're most excited about. We'll have even more next month as additional events occur in the coming weeks.

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

The picture that emerges is a fascinating one, with a mix of projects that show different creators branching in numerous directions to connect with gamers. I'm thrilled about our exclusive deep-dive into Dragon Age: The Veilguard for our big cover story, representing the return to one of the biggest RPG franchises since the 2014 release of Inquisition. Alongside titles like Assassin's Creed Shadows (p. 46) and Call of Duty: Black Ops 6 (p. 51), we see publishers looking to find new angles on long-established franchises.

But there are also new ideas at play, like the mind-bending The Alters (p. 40) or the Persona team's work on a new franchise in Metaphor: ReFantazio (p. 52). Meanwhile, indie devs continue to gain steam through creative risk-taking, like Nice Dream's Goodnight Universe (p. 57) or Thorium's Undermine 2 (p. 58). It's an exciting time for the hobby.

That kind of variety makes for a healthy gaming scene, but the big announcements this year come against a troubling backdrop. The layoffs and closures industry-wide have continued unabated for months now, affecting tens of thousands of talented people working in games. It's hard not to chalk that up to shortsighted decision-making from executives, who often seem intensely focused on quarterly profits over the sort of long-term investment that might, in turn, result in much better (and more profitable) releases.

I'm crossing my fingers that we see a turnaround soon; a lot of people are hurting because of these decisions, and many games themselves are likely to be poorer in the coming months and years due to a lack of experienced hands guiding their development. If you care about games, it's a topic that should be on your radar, even as you continue to discover the next big game you're excited about.

Play well. Be well.

GAMEINFORMER
DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD

DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD

We visited BioWare for an exclusive look at the newly renamed Dragon Age: The Veilguard. Our cover highlights the seven companions Rook, the player character, will meet on their journey to save Thedas. We've got a deep dive into the elven academic veil jumper Bellara Lutara (who can be spotted up front and center in the cover image), and details on others like returning character Lace Harding and private detective Neve Gallus, beginning on p. 28.

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Graphic Designer

I love RPGs, especially RPGs where choices have consequences, and I can become a unique character instead of one that's already been planned for me. Before Baldur's Gate 3, it felt so long since a game like that was released. After putting 400+ hours into BG3, I'm extra hyped for Dragon Age! It's exciting to think about what character I'll build and which characters I'll romance. Dragon Age Inquisition's ending left us in suspense. I need to know what happens!

Marcus Stewart

Associate Editor

Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga rules. So much so that it made me wish for a video game adaptation. Movie tie-in games largely died out in the 2010s, and while they often weren't great, they could be fun ways to relive beloved films (e.g. Spider-Man 2). Sure, it's undoubtedly better we now get games with original stories set in a film's universe. Alien Isolation, Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora, and, of course, 2015's Mad Max are good examples. But if *Furiosa* premiered in the 2000s, I wonder how a promotional game would have fared.

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It's been ten years since the last full-fledged game in the franchise, but BioWare is finally ready to pull back the curtain on what's next for the fantasy world of Thedas. We visited the studio, spoke to the game's creators, and discovered what's changed in the highly anticipated new installment.

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The long-running indie studio's founders started with browser games in the early 2000s and evolved over decades to release the likes of the celebrated Snipperclips and Crow Country. We spoke with the team to learn more about what makes the studio tick.

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25 years after its first release, the atmospheric horror title has influenced countless developers in their approach to building games. We look back on the series and speak with some whose careers have been shaped by the game.

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What if you made that choice that would have taken your life in a completely different direction? And what if you could meet that person, and they were the only path to saving your life? 11 Bit Studios looks for the answers in their striking new sci-fi game.

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Sony and Microsoft have invested heavily in new controllers that aim to invite people of all abilities to enjoy gaming. We spoke with the teams that brought each to life.

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NINTENDO
SWITCH

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THE LEGEND OF ZELDA TEARS OF THE KINGDOM
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Replies

THE GENESIS OF A DREAM

Since Microsoft is slowly going into third-party software releasing their in-house games to PlayStation 5, it's great timing for Sega to release a new console to compete with PlayStation 5 in the console space since Nintendo Switch and Switch 2 is basically a handheld system. A new Sega console can even have the same size as the model 1 Genesis (best console design ever) with a Blu-Ray drive and even include a pack in game physical disc – a Sonic game – and $20 to $30 SEGA store credit to buy classic Sega first-party games in a storefront.

This launch library would be great: Sonic, Golden Axe, Alex Kidd, Vector Man, Outrun, Nights into Dreams, Streets of Rage, Phantasy Star, Eternal Champions, Shinobi, Virtua Fighter, and Fantasy Zone that will take care of the in-house software and completing it would be a GTA game, WWE 2K, Metal Gear Solid, Final Fantasy, Contra, and the EA Sports games. Hopefully the Sega online can have their classic library from the Master System to the Dreamcast ready to be bought online. Also, include Trophy support, a slot to put in an SSD drive up to 8 to 10 TB (with about 1.5 to 2 TB memory space), and steer away from add-ons. Even include an HD version of the Sega light phaser gun and a decent library to support it. **– Alexander via email**

↳ *Whether it's talking about Apple, Sega, or someone else, it's always fun to theorize what a hypothetical "new" player in the console space could bring to the table. Right now, there is no evidence that supports Microsoft is leaving the console market outside of it bringing some of its older exclusives to other platforms – a practice that PlayStation has been doing for a while, albeit to a lesser extent, with bringing its older exclusives to Steam. But for the sake of this question, let's assume Xbox does leave the market and there's newly vacated space for another major console. Sega probably isn't the best choice at this point in time.*

Sure, it had an extremely successful console in the Genesis, but outside of that, its existence as a console manufacturer was wrought by underperforming sales. After it successfully challenged Nintendo in the SNES era, Sega struggled to find its footing in the console market, with Sega CD, 32X, and Saturn all posting disappointing sales numbers. The sole, post-Genesis success story it did have was the Dreamcast, which has become a beloved console in the modern era, but its inability to keep up with its competitors – namely the PlayStation 2 – ultimately led Sega to discontinue the system and exit the console market altogether. Making a dent in the console market is difficult, particularly when the three current players have so thoroughly established themselves as the big three during the last two decades. And unfortunately, that first-party lineup you mentioned might be good for longtime Sega fans, but very few of those would move the needle in the mainstream based on name recognition alone. We're all nostalgic for consoles like Genesis and Dreamcast, but Sega re-entering the console market in a meaningful way seems like a longshot.

NEW WAYS TO PLAY

I would consider myself to be a bit of an old-fashioned gamer whereas 99 percent of my gaming library is sitting on bookshelves in my home. A couple of years ago, I received a PlayStation Now Premium gift card and decided to use it a few months ago. Even though I stayed away from digital gaming, it completely changed my gaming experience. I played Sea of Stars and Spider-Man: Miles Morales, and they are now personal favorites of mine. I tried to make the most of the month that I had by exploring and enjoying their worlds instead of making the platinum trophy my goal. Streaming those games not just changed my access to games but how I play them. **– Todd via email**

↳ *You're not alone in your experience. For many gamers, physical was the only way to go; having your collection organized on the shelf was a simple yet rewarding pleasure. However, in the last decade-plus, many have embraced digital gaming thanks to its convenience and, at times, lower prices. Streaming is an extension of that, though players' mileage may vary based on internet speeds and each person's tolerance for any input latency or lower-resolution textures.*

Subscription services like PlayStation Plus and Xbox Game Pass have recently been put under a microscope from a business-viability perspective, but from a gamer's perspective, they are godsends. Just like how you found two of your favorite games thanks to your subscription, players all over the globe find new games they love that are included as part of the cost of admission. Think of it as the Netflix Effect, where regardless of the reason you subscribed, you're already subscribed to the service, you might as well check out the other offerings.

Soundoff:

One franchise, many genres

We asked our readers and community which franchise they'd like to see branch out into a different genre. Here are some of their responses!

Sonic the Hedgehog as a turn-based RPG (specifically by Atlus). The style and twists on gameplay could be immaculate on top of a detailed storyline. **– tothemoonandbat via Instagram**

Capcom should make a Street Fighter-themed isometric hack-and-slash style game. Imagine Blanka balling off 10 enemies, tanking with Zangief and Siberian-expressing enemies, or blasting waves with Ryu's hadouken. **– Zach via Instagram**

It would be great to see a Zelda city-builder/farming sim/life sim set-up. Still have adventuring and such, but your focus is to rebuild Tears of the Kingdom Hyrule post-TotK with Hudson Construction. Rebuild Hyrule Castle Town, farm in Hateno, make fun food like Link does. **– Austin via Twitter**

Legend of Zelda. I know we got the NecroDancer collab and Hyrule Warriors, but I still think they could do more fun things with the Zelda series. Paper Zelda RPG? A Hyrule farming/town building game? If Mario can get so many games, maybe Link can try a few new activities too. **– ChronoDrifter via Threads**

I would like them to really revisit the Avengers game that failed and do better. Insomniac should have done that game or Rockstead or something. The individual characters had potential but the levels, the villains, and basically the non-use of many Marvel properties associated with the characters took away from what could have been a very good version of something kind of like Ultimate Alliance. **– Tra via Facebook**

Join the conversation

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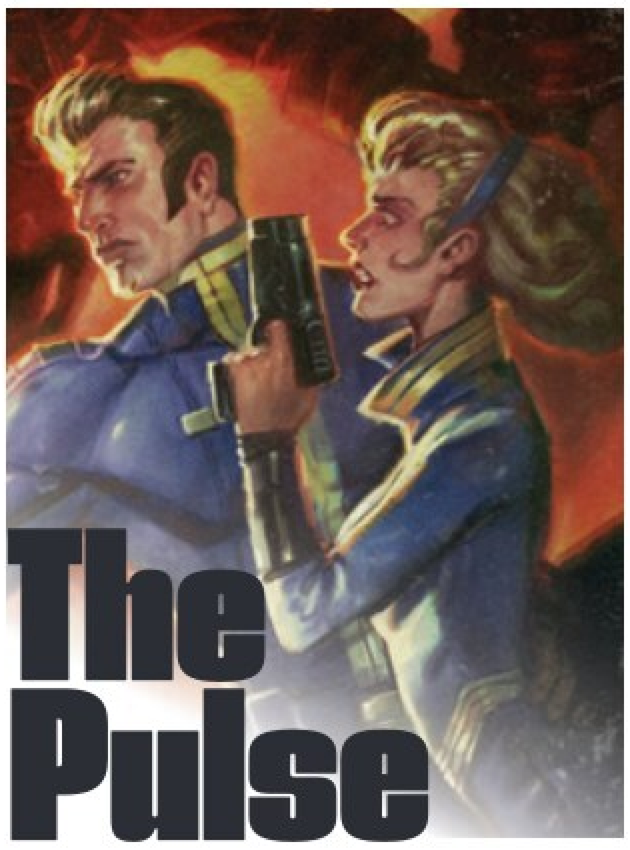


The Pulse

We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. Fallout 4 ▲
2. Elden Ring ▲
3. Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door ▲
4. Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 ▲
5. Lies of P ▲
6. Assassin's Creed Valhalla ▲
7. Stellar Blade ▼
8. Ghost of Tsushima ▲
9. Starfield ▲
10. Street Fighter 6 ▲

FULL HOUSE

I have two kids and recently became engaged to my future wife, who has four kids of her own! That is SIX KIDS! I love it but I am incredibly busy and find my hobby of video games slipping away. I no longer have time for these 100-hour RPG epics despite it being one of my favorite genres. How do I find time to take joy from these long epics and let go of the fact I may not be able to complete them? Or is this a symptom of games simply becoming WAYYYY too long. I am all for content, but when games drag on into the 40, 50, and 60-hour mark and beyond, is it content or filler for a back-of-the-box blurb on game length? I would love to see games trim back some of the empty travel and filler to be more streamlined experiences to cater to a wider demographic. I wonder what y'all's opinions are on this. Thanks for your time and keep doing what you all are doing. We all love it! **– Brendan via email**

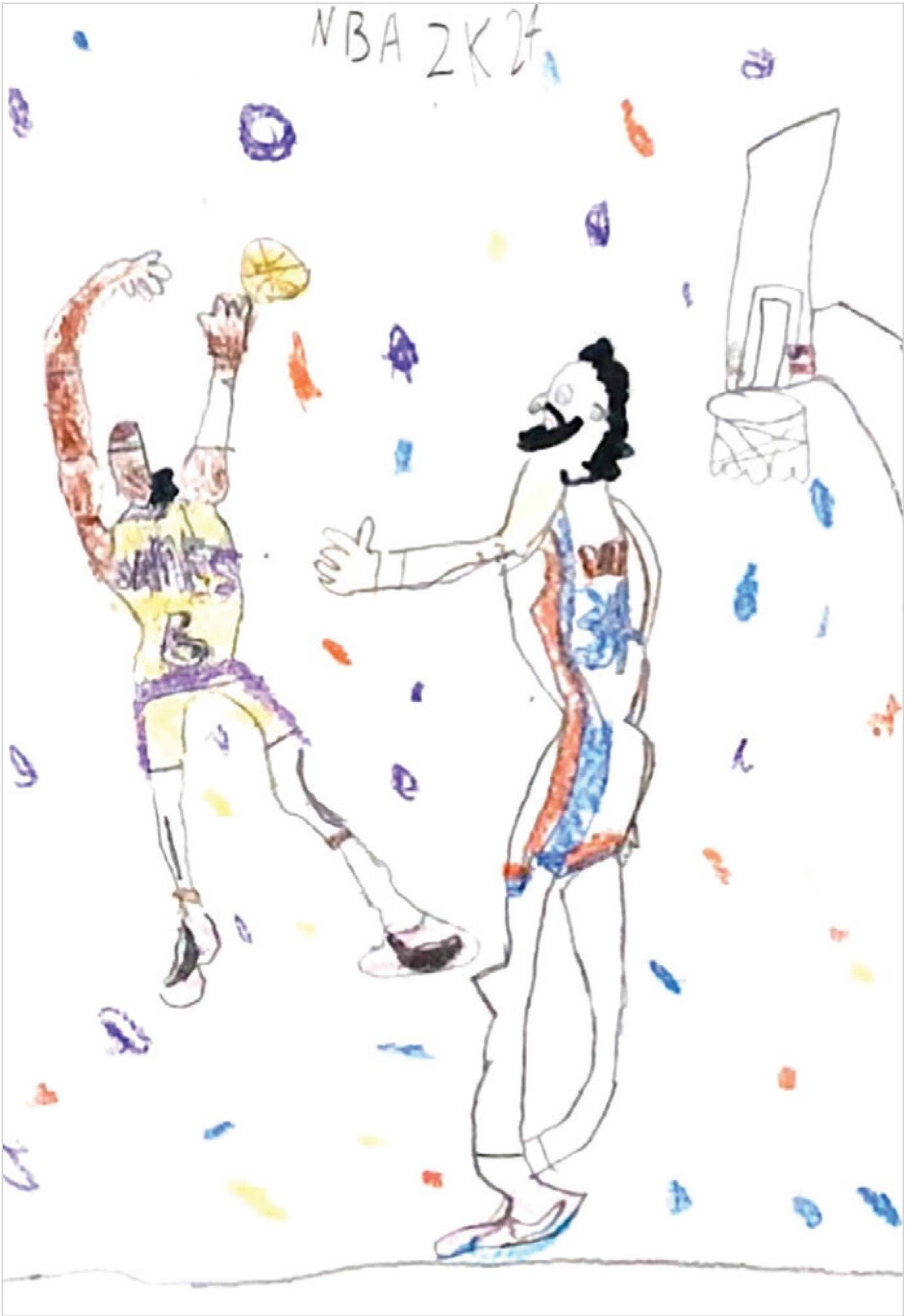
↳ *In recent years, we've seen a bit of pushback from the gaming community towards marketing beats that tout how much content is in an upcoming game. The reason is likely that a large chunk of the gaming population is in a similar situation to you; gaming as an adult – particularly one who has children – can be a herculean task at times. Thankfully, developers seem to be recognizing this. Just looking at our top 10 games of 2023, yes, it was headlined by sprawling adventures like The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom and Baldur's Gate 3, but it also featured more manageable adventures like Alan Wake 2, Jusant, Sea of Stars, Marvel's Spider-Man 2, and Star Wars Jedi: Survivor. Then, you look at our top-scoring games of 2024 so far, and the four highest-scoring games – Balatro, Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown, Minishoot' Adventures, and Animal Well – avoid overstaying their welcome.*

Every parenting arrangement is different, and with six kids in the house, we imagine it's all hands on deck most of the time, so you'll have to be judicious with your gaming choices. Long RPGs might still be doable, as long as you don't have a problem with taking a year to get through it. Given how little time it sounds like you have, we'd recommend looking into some of those shorter games we mentioned in the last paragraph or using a resource like HowLongToBeat.com to know what you're getting yourself into before you buy or download the latest new release.

ON THE HORIZON

Hello *G.I.*! First off, I wanted to say how much I appreciate that you guys are still doing your thing in a really grim games media landscape. I still love watching Replay/Super Replay each week. But I think what I look forward to the most from *G.I.* is your preview coverage of upcoming games. With more and more publishers seemingly turning to influencers to preview their games, and more established outlets left to review games around launch time, I really love when I can read thoughtful preview coverage at *G.I.*. Thanks for everything!
– GradientIowa via email

↳ ***As always, we love hearing that you enjoy the work we put out. The work you read, watch, and listen to from*** **Game Informer** ***truly is a labor of love. We're passionate about the games we play and the content we put out, and we're beyond grateful for the developers who continue to believe in the value of traditional media and the readers, viewers, and listeners who continue to support us in all our iterations.***



Reader art winner: Noah Lorenz, age 7

Reader art submission: Kaylee Vardy

Reader art submission: hereskai

Reader art submission: Roland McPhaden

↙
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GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers to get the latest information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the video game industry.

DAWNTRAIL
FINAL FANTASY
ONLINE
4

1.

Prior to Summer Game Fest, Brian took some extra days to visit some of the game studios in the surrounding area, including League of Legends and Valorant developer Riot Games

2.

Charles flew to Minnesota to take part in a MinnMax Dungeons & Dragons One-Shot campaign. When he wasn't DMing the game, Charles spent the rest of his time in Minneapolis making Leo Vader, Kyle Hilliard, and Ben Hanson look short

3.

Marcus traveled to Los Angeles' Hollywood Forever Cemetery to get his hands on Elden Ring's upcoming Shadow of the Erdtree DLC and to hug Miquella's bloody arm (?)

4.

Jon traveled to Los Angeles to get early access to Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail and sit down with director and producer Naoki Yoshida. Read his preview on p. 62 ■

THE SUMMER SPOTLIGHT

Summer Game Fest has slotted into the space left by the demise of E3, but how does it compare to the dearly departed, once-great show?

BY BRIAN SHEA

EVERY JUNE, FOR ONE WEEK, Los Angeles, a city best known for its connection to television and film, is taken over by the video game industry. Downtown LA – particularly the space near the Los Angeles Convention Center and LA Live – become an epicenter for networking and socializing within the games industry. Tales of legendary parties and meetings of the minds over late-night drinks from years past persist to this day, but everything has changed.

A simple stroll around the block surrounding the LA Convention Center would immediately tell you that the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) was in town. The Convention Center transformed with the likenesses of gaming's biggest mascots plastered all over it. Walking to the corner of Figueroa Street and Olympic Boulevard, you'd find yourself unable to avoid the almost oppressively large gaming ads. Even the Hotel Figueroa – perhaps the venue with the most synonymity with those aforementioned late-night meetings that often resulted in creative and business deals – always had its entire side plastered with an advertisement for one of the year's big games. Everybody in LA knew that it was E3 time.

June 2024, the LA Convention Center exterior sits bare. The massive billboards at the corner of Figueroa and Olympic are dedicated to Hulu's *Only Murders in the Building* and Don Julio tequila. In fact, the only gaming-related billboard is on the opposite side of the Hotel Figueroa: an outdated ad informing you that Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III is coming out on November 10 ... of last year. Even the Uber drivers, who would previously assume you were in town for E3, no longer ask about what video games they should buy.

That's because this is the first year E3 is officially dead. After a failed attempt to come back last year following the COVID-19 pandemic, organizer The ESA decided to not even attempt a show this year. But in its place has slid Summer Game Fest, an event founded in 2020 by The Game Awards creator and host Geoff Keighley. What started as a digital-only event has ballooned into a larger gathering of industry members during the four years of its existence.

Used as a catch-all term for the cornucopia of gaming events and livestreams occurring during what was traditionally the E3 timeframe, Summer Game Fest consists of three main pillars: the Summer Game Fest livestream, various partner streams, and a multi-day in-person event called Play Days. Much like The Game Awards and the famous E3 press conferences before it, gamers have come to expect all manner of exciting world premieres and announcements during the Summer Game Fest and partner streams. And like E3, Summer Game Fest Play Days allow media and content creators to check out the hottest upcoming games and interview those who create them.

PLAY DAYS
SUMMER GAME FEST

But Summer Game Fest is very much not E3 – and intentionally so. Taking place far from the venues E3 called its home, industry members no longer crowd the Convention Center; instead, the Summer Game Fest live stream is broadcast from the YouTube Theater far away from Downtown LA, while Play Days occurs in a small campus in the heart of the Fashion District. Summer Game Fest is a far cry from E3, and often for the better.

Just like the unavoidable advertisements and billboards, the massive crowds E3 once attracted are gone. Industry luminaries from across the globe still arrive to host meetings with media, content creators, and potential business partners, but it's much lower-key affair. When you walk through the Summer Game Fest Play Days campus, you're never late because you got stuck in a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd walking between expo halls; instead, delays are caused by running into people you know.

Summer Game Fest is also a much more well-oiled machine than E3 was in its waning years. Having learned from its early iterations, Summer Game Fest Play Days 2024 featured a smooth check-in process, an easy-to-understand layout that spans an entire campus, and air-conditioned cabanas – all things that SGF 2022, which consisted of only two rooms and swelteringly hot pods for interviews, could have only dreamed of.

And the games on display delivered. The livestream itself didn't possess the wow-factor that many have come to expect from these summer showcases, but it still surfaced a strong mix of triple-A and indie titles, as well as a welcomed acknowledgment by Keighley of the trials and tribulations faced by the industry in the wake of the ongoing waves of mass layoffs – something he was broadly criticized for not doing during The Game Awards 2023. Meanwhile, partner streams like the Xbox Games Showcase, Ubisoft Forward, and the Day of the Devs livestream helped carry the load, with big announcements and new gameplay trailers for some of the most exciting games of the next 18 months.

Summer Game Fest is often pitched as the replacement for E3 – I'll even use that descriptor when someone asks why I'm in town – but it's not really. Instead, it is, in many ways, what E3 aspired to be: a place where the industry can come together and discuss what the next year looks like, even if it now lacks many of the opportunities for gamers and fans to interface directly with games and creators. The event still has a lot of room for growth, but it's undeniable the show has improved year over year. Summer Game Fest may not be the "new E3" that so many describe it as, but it could very well become the long-running summertime staple that so many people look forward to tuning into year after year. ■

↘
**Opposite:
Indiana Jones and the Great Circle**

DAVE THE DIVER UNDERSTANDS WORKING AT A RESTAURANT

This sushi-hunting adventure game is unexpectedly one of the best representations of the rewards and struggles of working in the food and beverage industry

BY CHARLIE WACHOLZ

THERE ARE PLENTY OF FISH IN THE SEA when it comes to games that focus on food service or restaurant work as a central theme or mechanic, but Dave the Diver is the richest and tastiest thanks in no small part to how it seamlessly introduces and subsequently ditches new mechanics at the drop of a hat. Even early in the game, a standard dinner service puts you through the wringer: you grate wasabi, make the menu, pour beer and tea, and serve guests all in the same stroke, putting Dave's endurance to the test as he shuffles from one end of the bar to the other.

With nearly 10 years of on-and-off experience in the service industry, I've dabbled in handfuls of food and restaurant-oriented games because they speak to some of my own experiences, no matter how heightened or fantastic they may be. And while standouts like Overcooked or Battle Chef Brigade understand something about the experience (namely the chaotic and personal aspects, respectively), nothing hits as close to home for me as Dave the Diver.

> **“In my experience, these aspects usually make it easier to care about the place I work because I've invested a part of myself into its success after the service is over.”**

Whether you're balancing waiting on a dozen different tables during a dinner rush, cleaning up a mountain of spilled food in the wake of a child's temper tantrum, running keg after emptied keg up a flight of stairs, or making three drinks at once, you need to be able to think on your feet and balance tons of minuscule chores in perfect order to get through a shift just like Dave does in Dave the Diver.

Diving deeper into Dave's and my experience, though, this game especially nails what it's like working for a mom-and-pop. Yes, hospitality work is tough no matter how you slice it, but having worked in both corporate and independent restaurants and bars, they're often two completely different ballgames. In my first and only corporate restaurant gig, I was part of a massive staff and chain of command. There was a well-defined hierarchy in every division of the front and back of house, and every link in that chain had a specific job to do. For better and for worse, it's more organized and less personal; rules are firmer and more well-defined, but there are also more people behind you to help pick up the slack if you miss a beat. The need to keep dozens of plates spinning as you check task after task off your mental to-do list is just as present here, but it's different when you're off the clock.

Anyone who's worked at a small restaurant knows those boundaries are blurrier. I worked at a mom-and-pop sushi restaurant that closed due to personnel and staffing issues and currently work at a small cocktail lounge. During my time at both gigs, I've taken on odd jobs that fall far outside of the normal job description. While I wasn't diving into the ocean to stock a fridge or stumbling upon unknown civilizations like Dave does for Bancho's Sushi Bar, I've found myself putting up soundproof paneling to improve the acoustics at my current bar job or driving a catering order across town with the restaurant's only chef for a restaurant that explicitly didn't cater events.

In my experience, these aspects usually make it easier to care about the place I work because I've invested a part of myself into its success after the service is over. I get a strange sense of pride and accomplishment from looking at a table I helped fix or a menu item I helped develop that's hard to explain to others. Unlike my other work, nobody knows I had a hand in making it; there's no signature or byline at the top of a cocktail menu to advertise my contribution. And despite its closure over four years ago, I still notice my trace in the new bar that took over the restaurant I used to work. Signs hang on nails I hammered, and the patio fence still wears a wash I helped apply.

Again, it's more personal; your relationship with the bar or restaurant doesn't begin or end with you clocking out, and I feel that in Dave the Diver. Dave is helping Cobra build out the restaurant because they have a personal relationship, not just because it's his job. It is a double-edged sword that can make this kind of work difficult to navigate because your bosses and coworkers tend to become your friends. I vividly remember a time when I spoke to a busy coworker as a friend but was met as a colleague with hostility because they were overworked. That moment, their words changed our dynamic permanently.

You can see where the cracks occasionally show between Dave and Cobra in the game. Though it's not an outwardly negative partnership, flashes of untowardness tinge their relationship with toxicity as Cobra repeatedly pressures Dave to overcommit in the hopes of drawing in more customers. Eventually, Cobra enlists Dave in the service of grad students and archaeologists with hardly a second thought. Dave can't say no – there wouldn't be much game if he did – but Cobra weaponizes Dave's desire to do right by others, which is realistic.

I've been fortunate enough to work with and for great people, but any veteran will tell you the service industry is a dog-eat-dog world. That doesn't mean people who work in this industry are the tip-hungry struggling artists, party animals, or burnouts we're often depicted as, though. At our core, we're people who enjoy serving others and believe in the power and pleasure of good food and drink. Dave wears that belief with an earnest and relatable pride that permeates and supplants this game's charm while representing the ups and downs of working at a mom-and-pop restaurant. ■

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Flash And Substance

SFB Games' journey from web games to Snipperclips, Crow Country, and beyond

BY MARCUS STEWART

SFB Games may not be a name at the forefront of your mind, but depending on your gaming circles, you've likely come across its work. If you frequented Newgrounds.com during the 2000s era of Flash games, odds are you played at least one of its many titles. If you were an early adopter of the Nintendo Switch, Snipperclips: Cut It Out Together may have been one of the first games you played with friends. Classic survival horror fans have flocked to its most recent release, the horror game Crow Country.

The London-based studio has quietly been one of the most consistent, creative, and surprising developers in the industry for decades, yet it feels like it's just getting started. Founded and operated by brothers Tom and Adam Vian, the pair fell in love with gaming at a young age, thanks to the Sega Master System (Genesis in North America). Tom cites games like Aladdin, the Sonic the Hedgehog series, and Micro Machines as major loves and influences. Their first taste of game-making was European-exclusive Micro Machines Turbo Tournament 96's track editor.

Though they enjoyed creating mean-spirited Micro Machines courses, the pair didn't have aspirations of making games as young kids. They never considered it a real career people got paid to do. Adam states their first real interest in development arose from PlayStation 1 magazine demo discs, which sometimes included games made by unknown creators with the publicly available Net Yaroze PS1 development kit. But the Vians were too young to attempt game-making at that scale. Thankfully, it was the late '90s, and Flash games were taking off.

FLASHPOINT

Adam and Tom began experimenting with Adobe Flash in 2001 when they were just teenagers, initially creating animations. But even getting these cartoons to play required learning basic programming, which forced the pair to get their feet wet building art in Flash. Their work brought them to Newgrounds, where creators used Flash to create cartoons and games. Tom and Adam frequented the site, became inspired by its game creators, and started developing their own small games.

By 2003, the pair dubbed themselves the Super Flash Bros. Tom, 17 at this point, and Adam, 14, quickly cranked out games, often within a few days. They started with simple titles like The Bounce, where players controlled a giraffe that bounced up and down to collect stars, rising increasingly higher with each bounce until it landed on the moon. They went on to create a platforming series called James the Zebra, which allowed the pair to sharpen their respective skills: Adam with animation and Tom with programming.

One big hit was Haunt the House, a game in which players controlled a ghost to possess objects in a 2D doll house and scare people. According to them, the game was very popular in schools, as students stealthily played it in computer labs. "That one has a weirdly large cultural footprint to this day," Adam says. Blue Rabbit's Climate Chaos, a puzzle adventure, was the first game they made money from. The rapid release cadence caused the pair to accrue experience and quickly grow more receptive to feedback.

Crafting so many games combined with SFB's broad taste in game genres resulted in them tackling a variety of styles. Adam's massive love of Professor Layton and Ace Attorney inspired what would become one of the studios' enduring franchises: Detective Grimoire. This point-and-click mystery franchise sees Grimoire (who Adam reveals is heavily based on Ace Attorney's lovable doofus Gumshoe, while his name is taken from Vincent Valentine's father, Grimoire Valentine, from Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII) unravel crimes by collecting clues and questioning suspects. Detective Grimoire became one of SFB's most successful Flash games, leading to several higher-quality sequels.

The Vians never planned to become bigger than they were. As Tom describes, they "sort of stumbled into it." Despite releasing over two dozen tiles at this point, SFB wasn't an official company. They were just two freelancers. That all changed when PlayStation entered the scene, and the pair found themselves working on software for PlayStation Mobile, the platform for its Xperia Play phone. At E3 2012, PlayStation planned to promote the initiative by displaying the logos of all the developers bringing games to it. Adam and Tom had no legal status as a company or a logo. That needed to change quickly, and they only had three days to do it.

"That's why our company name is uninspired, and that's why a logo is just a stamp with the letters because we had no time to dream up a hilarious, iconic, interesting mascot or anything," Adam says. "It was like, okay, we were the Super Flash Bros. We just cut it back to SFB Games. That's what it stands for."

CROW COUNTRY
May 9 2024
Wishlist and play the demo
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CROW

Co-Founder Tom Vian; Opposite: Haunt the House

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CUTTING IT OUT TOGETHER

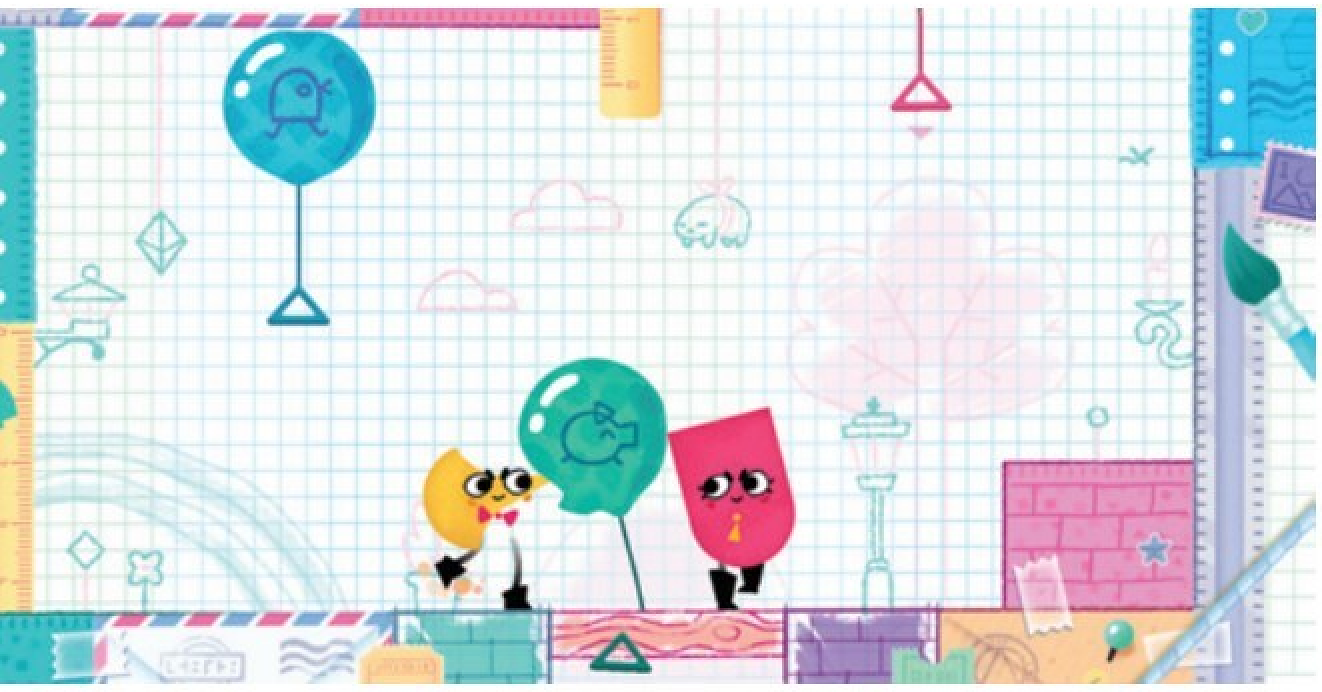
A few years later, SFB attended a UK indie event to show off Haunt the House, which attracted the attention of a European Nintendo scout. He liked the game, which sparked a conversation.

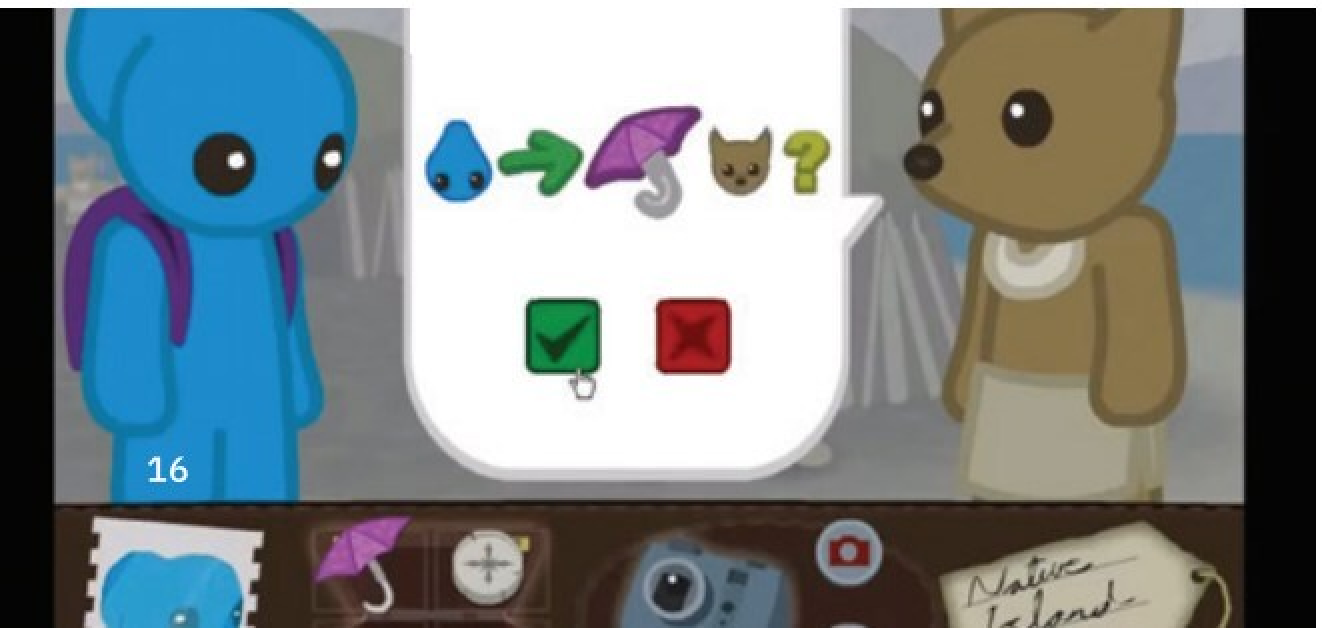
"It was very much a moment," Adam says. "He said to me, 'Oh, have you approached any platform companies with this? 'And I said, 'We've spoken to Sony briefly, and we've spoken to Microsoft briefly.' And he said, 'What about Nintendo?' And I said, 'I don't know anyone in Nintendo.' And I'm not kidding; he literally pulled his business card out and said, 'You do now.'"

This began a relationship that saw SFB pitch a couple of games for Wii U that, despite not getting picked up, helped keep the Vians on Nintendo's radar. During this period, the pair were between projects and sharing a co-working space. They decided that one week, they would each bring an idea for a game and make it within a couple of days just as a mental palate cleanser. Adam's concept: a fighting game called Friend Shapes, where two shapes try to cut pieces out of each other to make the other one fall over. The competitive angle didn't last long as Adam quickly realized the concept was more fun when you worked together to cut shapes carefully. Tom loved the idea after seeing it in action.

"And then a day later, we were laughing out loud playing it," Adam says.

Adam and Tom immediately felt this was the best idea they ever had. After making a demo, they unsuccessfully pitched it to a handful of indie publishers, but it would be Nintendo that, to their surprise, said yes. Unbeknownst to them then, Nintendo was gearing up for the launch of the Switch and was looking for a family-friendly multiplayer launch title. SFB's unique paper-cutting game was the perfect fit. "We really were right place, right time with that. Just kind of luckily," Adam says.





After receiving instructions for developing a Switch game without actually knowing what it was, SFB would learn about its existence months later. They'd also learn its game would be a launch title for Nintendo's new console, which was equal parts flattering and nerve-wracking. Developing for Switch also necessitated the adoption of Unity, a widely used engine the brothers had never used before. "We have a history of big gaming companies forcing us to do things that are actually for our own good," Tom says.

SFB contracted two more people to help get the game that would become Snipperclips off the ground: artist Catherine Unger (who helped create the art design of the Detective Grimoire sequels) and programmer Daniel Gallagher. The four worked in a small, windowless office, with Nintendo routinely visiting to check on the game's progress. SFB often scrambled toward the finish line, but the pressure and prestige of Nintendo's vote of confidence inspired them to deliver the best title they'd ever created.

"It was a very exciting time. It felt we were really at the forefront of something," Adam says.

Snipperclips: Cut it Out Together launched alongside the Switch on March 3, 2017, to positive reviews. Many hailed its mechanics as the most inventive and entertaining use of the Switch's features at the time. Seeing the game promoted in Nintendo commercials and at events was a surreal thrill to SFB, as was the loving reception they received from players. Being a launch title also meant Snipperclips had the eShop all to itself, and combined with the positive reception, it became SFB's most commercially successful game ever. Not bad for SFB's first console game.

"It was so nice hearing people say, 'Oh, I played this with my kids, I played this with my wife, I played this with my grandparents," Adam says "...I mean, yes, everybody was busy playing Breath of the Wild; as they should have been. But if they weren't playing Breath of the Wild, there's a good chance they were playing Snipperclips."

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A HORRIFIC DETOUR

SFB followed Snipperclips' success by releasing a new Detective Grimoire game called Tangle Tower. In actuality, it had begun working on the game before Snipperclips but shelved it once Nintendo gave them the green light. With Snipperclips out the door, they could resume work, and funny enough, Tangle Tower would serve as another launch game, this time for Apple Arcade.

Tangle Tower launched in October 2019 to positive reviews and has become a cult favorite that's gradually gained attention and sales in the years since. While a more niche success than Snipperclips, Tangle Tower has made enough money over its existence to keep SFB going, something Tom says is the ultimate mark of success. The game was such a slow burn in terms of recognition that SFB remains pleasantly surprised whenever someone tells them they played and loved it.

After finishing Tangle Tower, SFB decided the next project would be a direct sequel called The Mermaid Mask. As they chipped away at the game, the pandemic struck, and development stalled. Tom became busy porting Tangle Tower to other platforms. Adam, now confined at home, began learning new tools in Unity and eventually created dozens of unfinished prototypes. In the process, he learned rudimentary 3D modeling. It was during this time of isolation that he became really obsessed with playing PS1 horror games like the early Resident Evils.

His love of these games inspired him to make his own horror game in Dreams, Media Molecule's game-making platform/video game. You can still play it on Dreams; it's called Horror Kart, and you solve survival horror-style puzzles while driving around a graveyard as a teddy bear on a go-kart. Although Adam enjoyed this game, he wanted something that could be played independently. So he started making another survival horror game, just for his own amusement.

"I thought maybe if I finish it, I'll just put it on itch.io, maybe for free, and it'll be something just cute on the side," Adam says. "And I just kept making it and kept making it. And it grew into a substantial game, which I eventually showed to Tom and said, 'Oh, by the way, I've made a horror survival game. Do you want to see it?"

the Mermaid Mask

Co-Founder Adam Vian; Center: Detective Grimoire; Left: Snipperclips, Blue Rabbit Climate Chaos

After Tom saw its potential, the two realized this could be a full-fledged game. A good thing, too, as the Mermaid Mask was at a standstill, momentarily freeing up Adam's schedule. However, as the survival horror project that would become Crow Country gained steam, work on The Mermaid Mask resumed. Adam now had to juggle two development cycles, which he says was "a regrettable situation to be in." Working on two games demanded all of his time, and Mermaid Mask also required him to oversee collaborators. He couldn't pause it but didn't want to slow down on Crow Country. It wasn't until six months before Crow Country's launch that SFB was able to devote its full attention to finishing the game on time, which it did.

Crow Country launched on May 9, 2024, to glowing reception (read our review on p. 76). When asked if SFB has gotten the survival horror bug out of its system now, Adam says they've only proved they can make a good one and that there's a big audience for it. He's not wrong; Tom says, barring Snipperclips, Crow Country is SFB's most successful launch, which is perhaps even more impressive because this didn't have a giant marketing machine like Nintendo behind it.

Adam says he had no idea what he was doing during most of Crow Country's development. He was learning on the fly. Now that he has a better handle on the genre, he says he'd love to use that experience to make another game and see what he comes up with.

STICKING TOGETHER

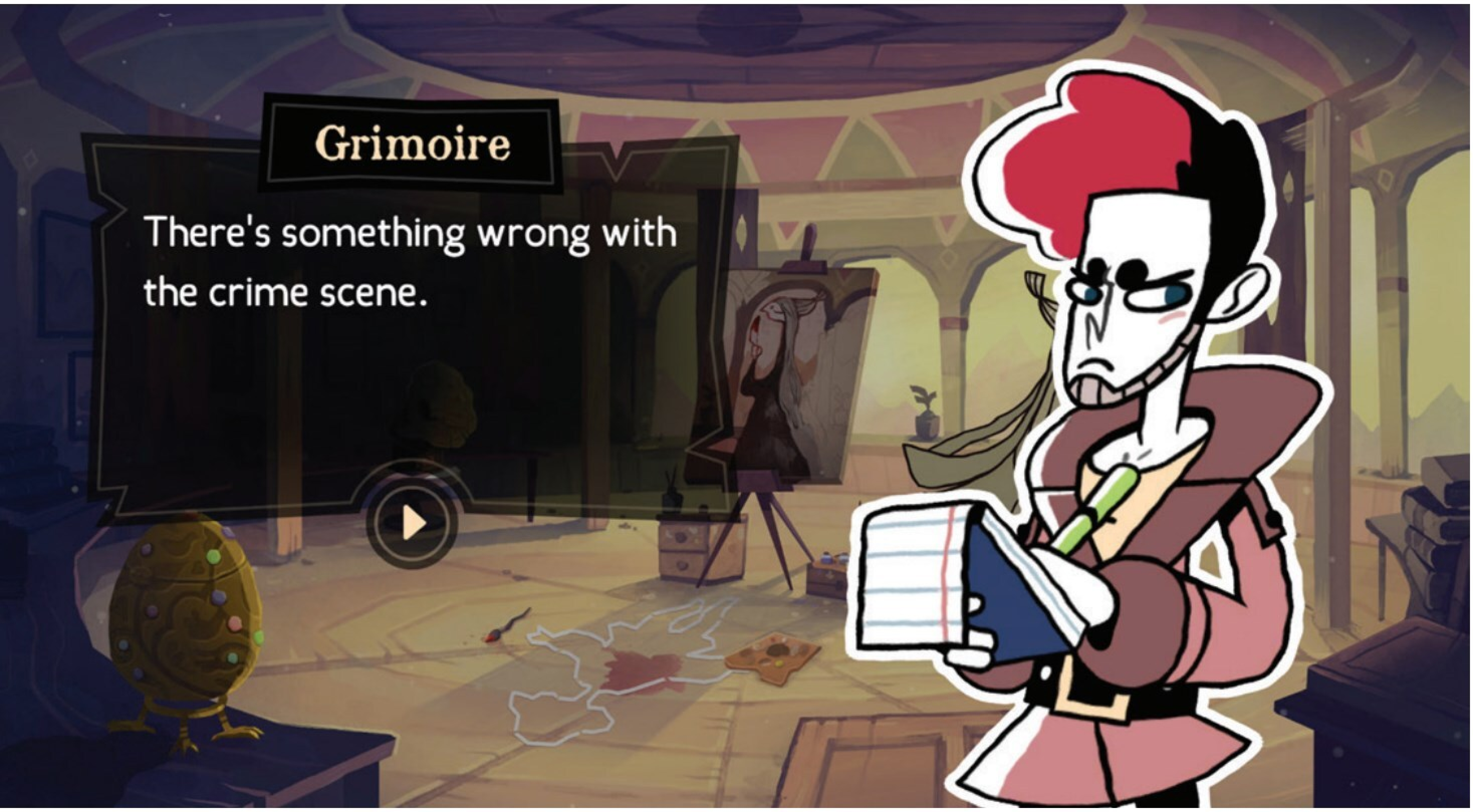
SFB wants to tackle many new genres. Tom is a passionate turn-based strategy fan and has ideas about what their take on the genre could look like. Adam says they would love to make a rhythm game like Parappa the Rappa/Um Jammer Lammy, two of the brothers' favorite PS1 games.

Whatever they pursue, they'll make it the same way they always have: with just the two of them (and maybe some contractors). Tom and Adam have been SFB's only employees in its 12-year existence; anyone they've brought on has always been on a contract basis. Though they're open to the possibility of hiring one or two staff members, they view their small size as a safety net of sustainability. They're afforded the luxury to take breaks between projects and don't have to worry about the financial overhead of paying full-time employees.

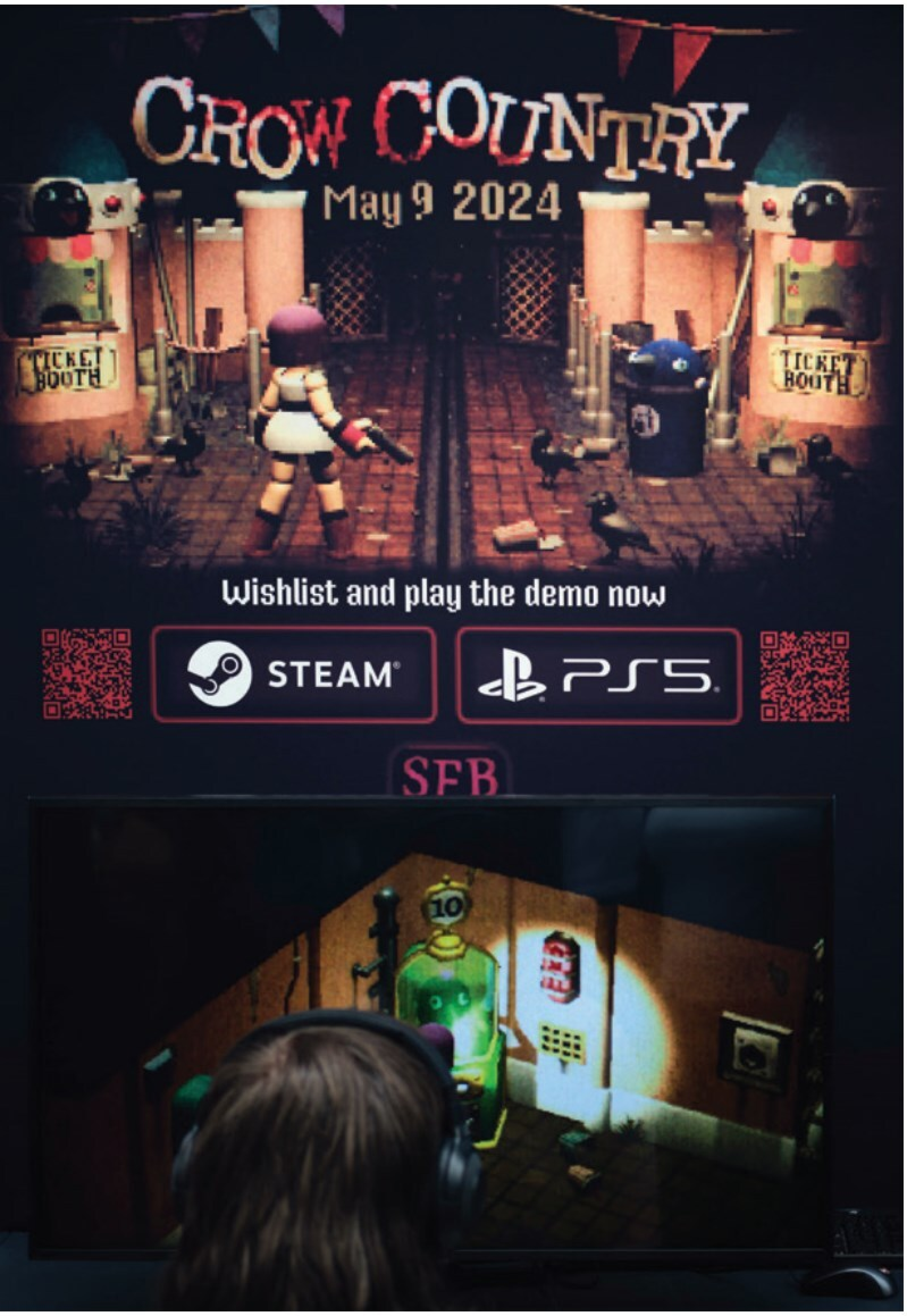
"I'm kind of happy in our tiny little safe bubble where we're too small to be worried about anything like that," Adam says. "Because when you're two people in the company, there's no one that can fire you. So that's always nice."

As a duo, working with Flash taught them how to make more with less to learn on the fly. As individuals, Tom says working with Nintendo taught him how to develop for a wide audience and, most of all, to discard ideas that simply aren't working no matter how married they are to them. Adam's biggest lesson is prototyping until something is fun before getting too deep into a project. He cites a failure called Phantom Pharoah's Treasure Trap, in which SFB dived headfirst into making art and animations, but the core game was never very fun.

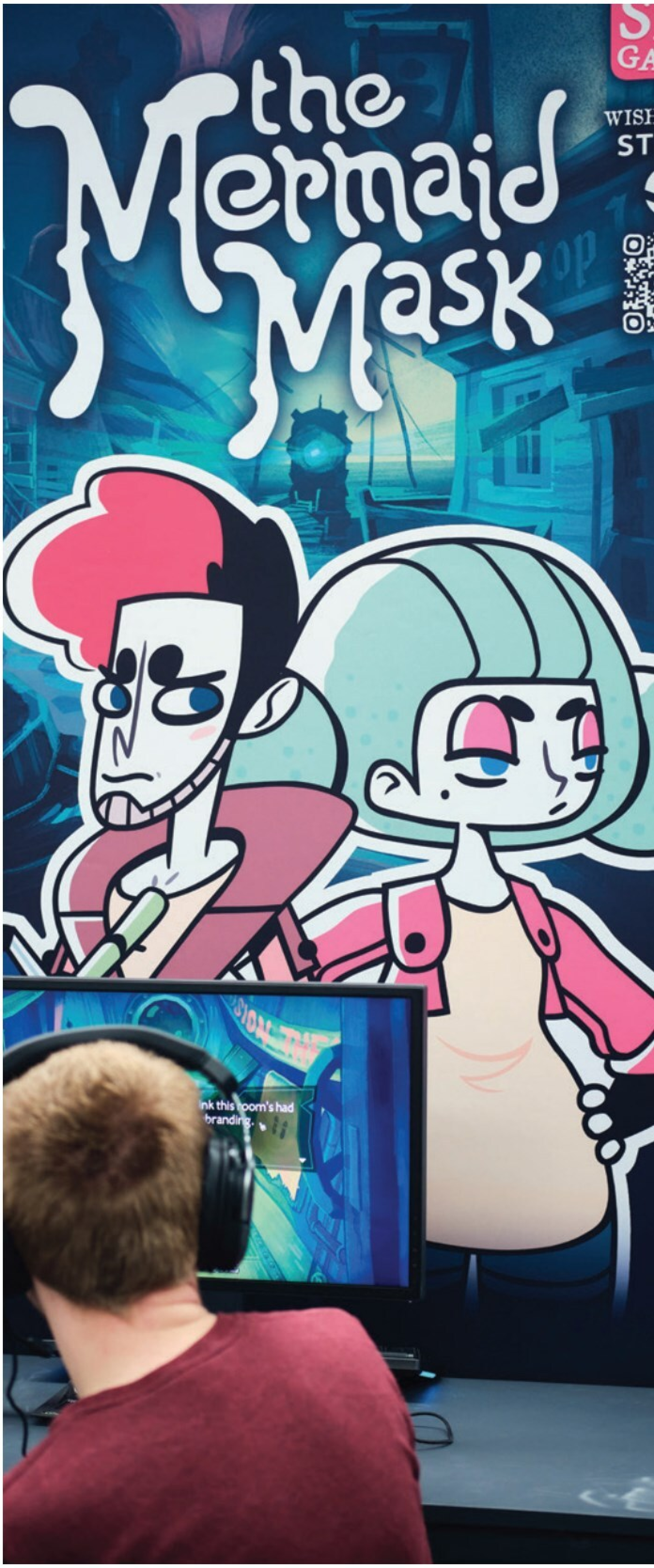
As a fan, I look forward to seeing how SFB continues to apply these lessons, both in The Mermaid Mask and beyond. ■



There's something wrong with the crime scene.


CROW COUNTRY
May 9 2024
TICKET BOOTH
TICKET BOOTH
Wishlist and play the demo now
STEAM
PS5
SFB

SFB
What's that?
A Examine


the Mermaid Mask

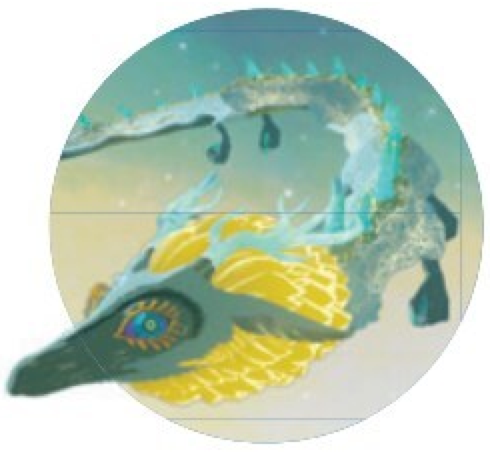
The Mermaid Mask; Left: Tangle Tower;
Center: Crow Country

TOP FIVE

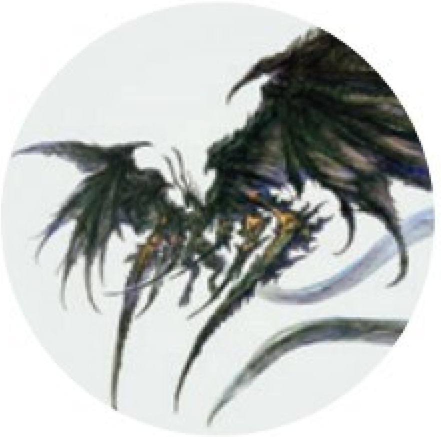
DRAGONS

As the most celebrated and recognizable of mythical beasts, dragons have been well represented in games. But our all-time favorites rise above the rest

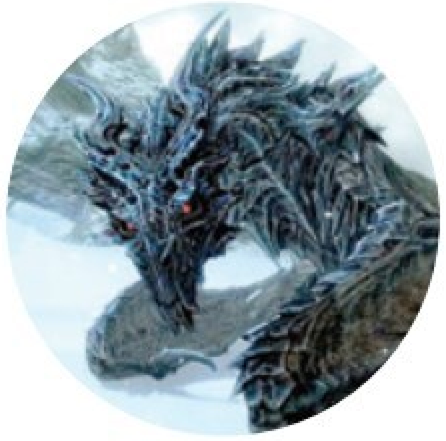
BY MATT MILLER



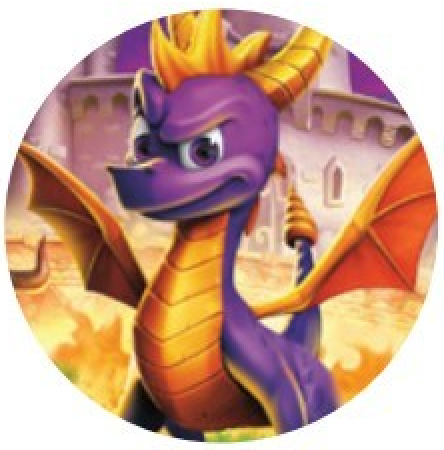
1 We won't be the ones to spoil the secret of **The Light Dragon** in Tears of the Kingdom, but it's enough to know that Link spends his lengthy adventure watching the majestic creatures that float by overhead. One of those scaled beasts hides a truth that sheds new light on the whole Zelda legend we're witnessing.



2 Explicitly described as the king of the dragons, **Bahamut**'s appearance in Final Fantasy XVI is arguably the most awesome in a long history of incredible appearances throughout the series. The Eikon boss fight in which he features thrums with energy, excitement, and cataclysmic consequences.



3 Just reading the name has us hearing those rhythmic drum beats and warrior's chorus. **Alduin** is the most ancient and powerful of Tamriel's dragons, and his prophesized battle against the Dragonborn lent Skyrim an epic quality that is hard to forget.

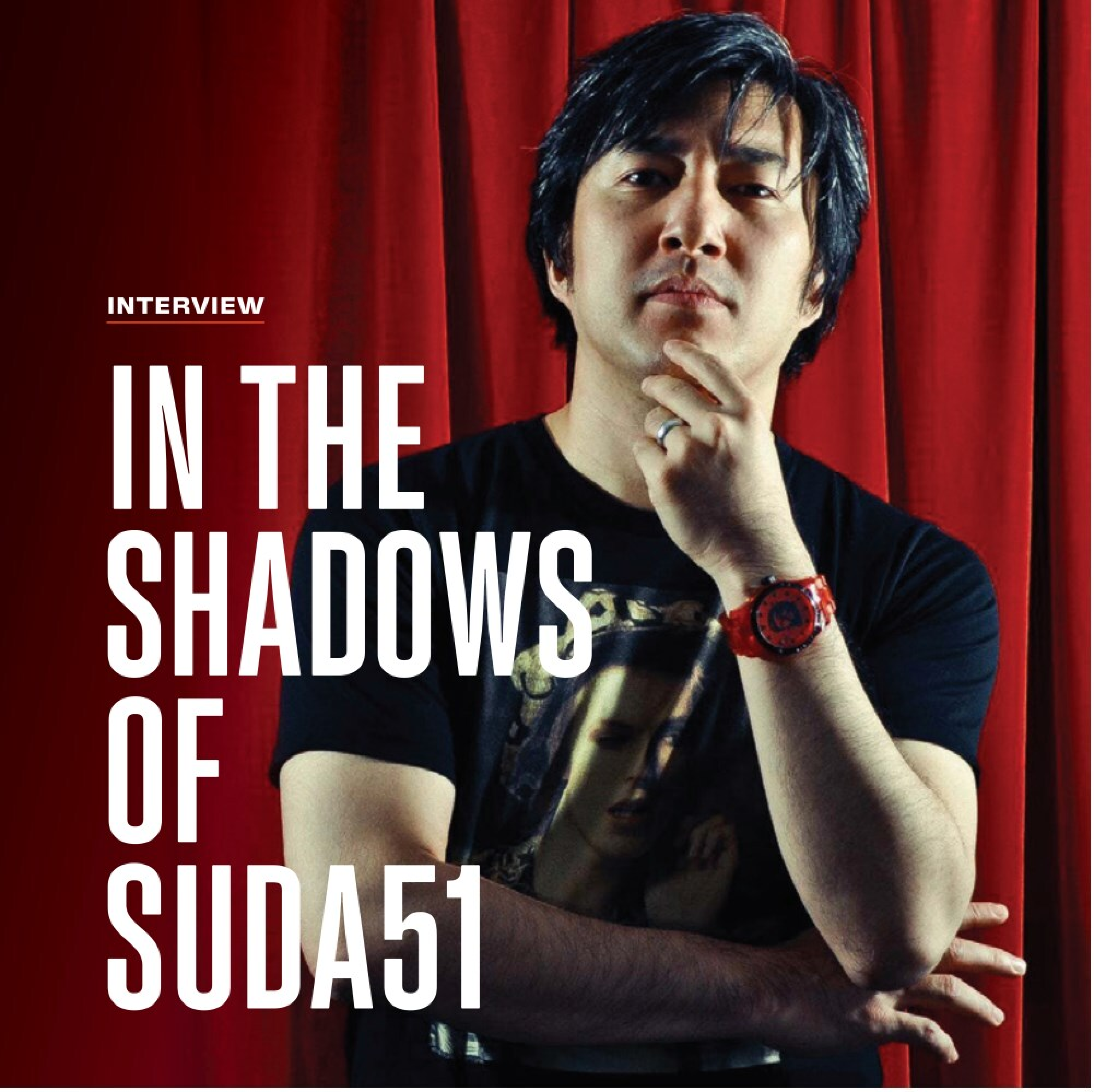


4 For many, **Spyro**'s whimsical adventures were a gateway into fantasy and a love of dragons. His early adventures from Insomniac earned their reputation for platforming fun, and the adorable purple protagonist remains one of the most recognizable video game heroes.

5 Not every dragon has scales. **Kazuma Kiryu** earned his title "Dragon of Dojima" not just because of his detailed tattoo but also because of his fierce reputation in battle, a deep sense of honor, and unwavering pursuit of justice throughout the Yakuza/Like a Dragon series. ■

INTERVIEW

IN THE SHADOWS OF SUDA51



GOICHI "SUDA51" SUDA IS ARGUABLY the most consistently unique game designer in the industry. He created Killer7, the No More Heroes series, worked with James Gunn (before he directed *Guardians of the Galaxy* or was put in charge of DC films) on Lollipop Chainsaw, and lots more. In preparation for his role as the keynote speaker at MomoCon this year, we caught up with him over e-mail to discuss his next game, Hotel Barcelona (a collaboration with Deadly Premonition creator Hidetaka "Swery65" Suehiro), remastering his 2011 game Shadows of the Damned, and Batman. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

You were publicly unhappy with Shadows of the Damned at launch. How do you feel about it in 2024?
A lot of things happened at the time, but I look back on the whole experience pretty fondly now. While we were making the original, we definitely had a lot of friction with EA – we argued about a lot of aspects and ideas for the game, and both we and EA made a lot of compromises, but those experiences are what brought about Garcia, Paula, Fleming, and their whole story, so I love the end result as a Grasshopper game in general and as our own personal creation as well. I had some great experiences with Mikami making the game; we got called out to Los Angeles by [publisher] EA this one time, and there were like ten people in this hotel suite sitting at this big table. When we walked in, it kinda freaked us out. We got really bitched out, getting asked things like, "Just what the hell are you trying to make?!" That kind of experience is rare – especially in the video game industry – and I feel like if this was the underworld or something I probably would've gotten whacked in that room (laughs). So many of the experiences we had back then were super interesting and are really fond and valuable memories now.

Now that I think about it, I believe that hotel thing happened at the Marriott in Los Angeles. Like I said, there were like ten people from EA – some of their top dudes – all lined up, and we had no idea what was going on. We were simply told, "Come to this meeting." No context or anything, so we were shocked when we got there. It's actually sort of an awesome memory now. It wasn't exactly scary, since being in the video game industry and all, I knew we weren't actually going to get killed or anything, but we were definitely surprised.

Anyway, I'm really proud of what we made, and I cherish all the memories I have of those times.

You and Swery65 use similar names. You both strive to make unique games. Does it bother you when people confuse the two of you? Or is it flattering?
I'm really good friends with Swery, so it doesn't bother me at all. I mean, they're totally different numbers anyway, so I really don't get annoyed or anything when people get them mixed up.

Would you consider making a licensed DC video game with James Gunn?
I haven't spoken with him much recently apart from a few greetings or DMs on Twitter here and there, but I would totally be down with doing another game with him if the opportunity presented itself. I love Batman, so if it was going to be a DC game, then I'd really like to try doing something with the *Black & White* series. Also, James is really good at always making sure to get back to me quickly whenever I message him, which I really appreciate, but I know that he's obviously extremely busy, so I try not to bother him too much.

When will Killer7 get the remake/remaster treatment?
Unfortunately, we don't own the IP for Killer7 – Capcom does – so I don't really have any say in that. ■

You can read our full unabridged conversation with Suda51 at GameInformer.com

GEAR

UPGRADE YOUR SUMMER

BY MATT MILLER

① RAZER BLADE 18 LAPTOP

Razer's long-running Blade laptop line has been an excellent portable PC gaming solution for many years. Smaller sizes should be your go-to if your primary need is long battery life and easy transportation. The new Blade 18 is instead your best option if you're looking to stand toe-to-toe with many high-end desktop setups while still being able to unplug and game elsewhere from time to time.

The gorgeous 18-inch QHD+ 300 Hz mini-LED display is the star of the show, exhibiting a remarkable gamut of bright colors with incredible clarity. G-Sync ensures minimal delay between button press and onscreen action. The Thunderbolt 5 connection allows for blazingly fast data transfer. An Intel Core I9 HX series works with the GeForce RTX 4090 to pump out even the most aggressive modern games at ultra settings. It is, quite simply, a beast of a machine.

While it's lighter than it might look, limited battery life means you'll want to keep it plugged in when you can. However, the single aluminum block construction makes it extremely strong, and the anodized exterior treatment is distinctive, anti-fingerprint, and resistant to scratches. A wealth of options exist to tweak your purchase, including an even more expensive 4K display. But any way you go, this is the machine to snag if you've been saving up for a long time, and you're ready to defy the expectation that laptops can't compete with a bulkier static setup.

Starts at $3,100 | *razer.com*

② PULSE ELITE WIRELESS HEADSET

If your goal is high performance on a particular platform, there's often a good reason to consider first-party accessories. In the case of high-end audio on your PS5, the Pulse Elite is a standout success, leveraging Sony's 3D Audio technology and PlayStation Link for extremely fast audio connection. The oddly curved visual aesthetic might be an acquired taste, but you're unlikely to have complaints about the resulting comfort; cushy earcups and comfortable over-head fit are ideal for longer play sessions. On PS5, you can even tweak EQ onscreen.

The headset also supports simultaneous connection to your phone via Bluetooth, which is increasingly a highly desirable functionality as it proliferates across the market. The planar magnetic drivers produce a clean, beautiful, and precise sound profile that is hard to beat. While still relatively pricey, the sound quality and comfort here are what you'd expect in even more high-end cans. That makes the Pulse Elite a strong value, especially for dedicated PS5 enthusiasts, even while remaining compatible with other platforms like PC and mobile.

$150 | *direct.playstation.com*

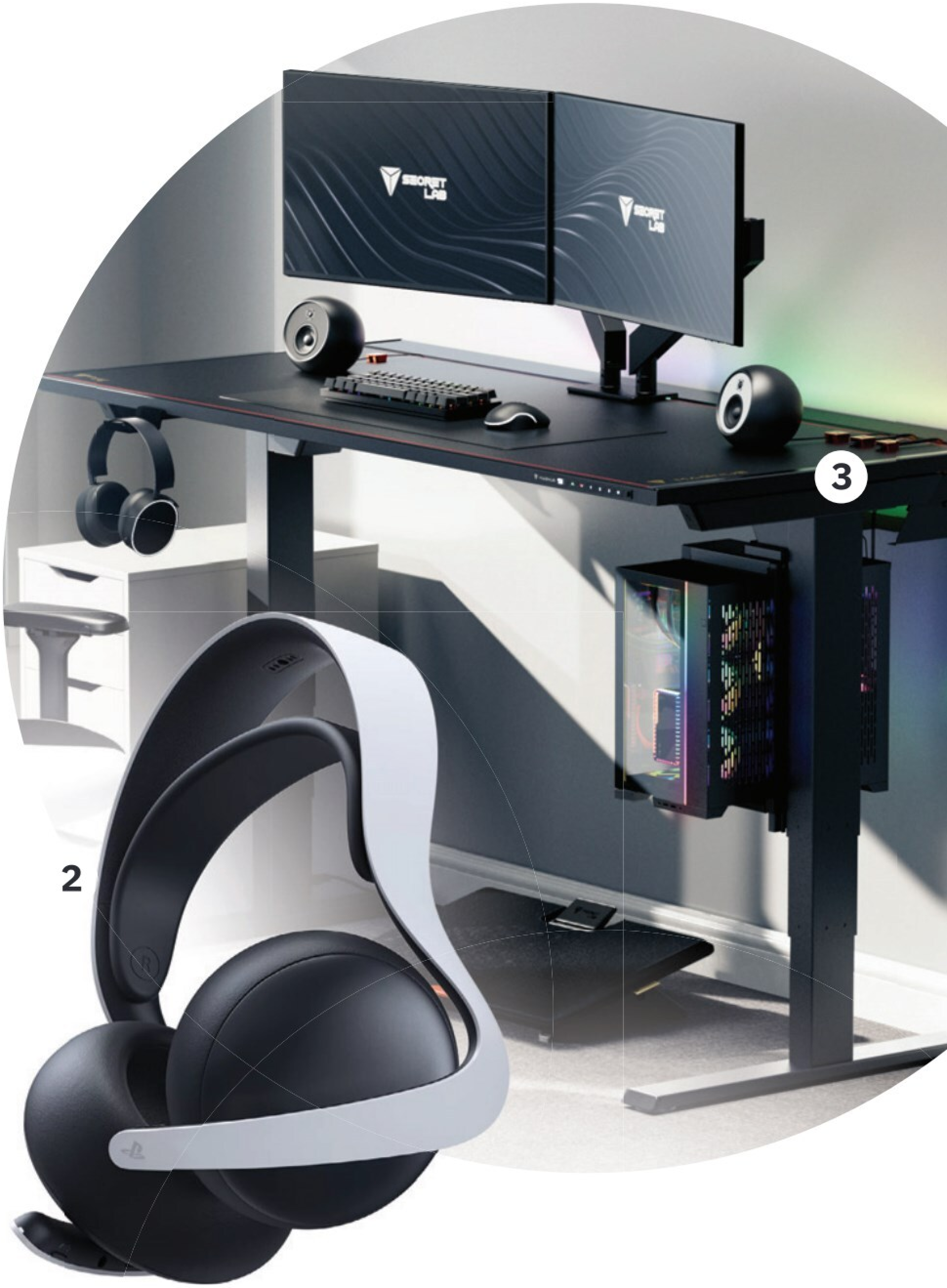
③ SECRETLAB MAGNUS PRO GAMING DESK

We've been extremely impressed with Secretlab's ergonomic gaming chairs. That reputation for quality is only likely to increase as more players give a try to their premium desk solution. The Magnus Pro has a lot going for it, including easy-to-use sit-to-stand options at the press of a button, excellent cable management at the rear, and durable steel construction and materials that justify the price tag.

Build aesthetics are generally understated and attractive unless you want to spring for more splashy options, like the selection of a colored desk mat – which fits snugly using a magnetic connection – or RGB lighting. It also comes in both a standard size of around 59 inches or a larger 70-inch model that's ideal if you're rocking multiple monitors or recording setups. The array of optional add-ons is extensive, from headphone hangars to risers to underside PC mounts, allowing for exhaustive customization.

For anyone chasing a clean look and a focus on ergonomics and flexibility, the Magnus Pro steps past the occasionally tacky vibe of some other gaming desks into the realm of genuine quality home furniture. ■

Starts at $800 | *secretlab.co*



RETROSPECTIVE

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

We spoke with developers inspired by Silent Hill about why the alluring town is crucial to Konami's horror masterpiece

BY ASHLEY BARDHAN

SILENT HILL IS CELEBRATING its 25-year anniversary this year. It is one of few AAA video games named after the place it's set, and for good reason. The intractable town of Silent Hill is the series' undisputed star.

"I will forever be in awe of how much atmosphere and sense of 'place' was achieved in Silent Hill's locations given the limited hardware of the PlayStation," Headware Games solo developer Nathan Hamley says, who is currently working on the survival horror game Hollowbody. "Quite a lot of my enjoyment of the first two Silent Hill games comes from exploring the town of Silent Hill itself," which Hamley credits to "the flow of gameplay that comes from exploring a safer, wide-open location contrasted with smaller, more claustrophobic areas."

When you first drop into Silent Hill as anxious father Harry Mason – wearing his sensible leather coat, thinking he was prepared for a chill, lakeside vacation – you are faced with an onslaught of heavy mist. Your daughter is missing, and everything is gray. You walk down anemic streets, presented to you by fixed-camera angles, and limited tank controls make you feel consigned to a gray funeral march. You pass shuttered garage doors and leaf piles of monster gore until you find a colorful neighborhood map, which seems promising. But as you continue to trudge around, your path is continually blocked by inexplicable craters in the ground, which subtly leads you inside a creepy building.

"When I think of Silent Hill, I think of the hospitals, schools, and hotels – discarded monuments left behind by people who lived and died there," Adam Vian says, creative director at SFB Games, which recently released the evocative low-poly, Silent Hill-inspired horror game Crow Country. "The interiors of those abandoned buildings feel the most real, and the most human."

These shadows of life are observable from Silent Hill's earliest moments. Soon after the town ushers you indoors, Harry finds an empty house to strip for clues. The dining table looks like it was recently utilized. The four wooden chairs surrounding it have been pushed out, and there's a full bottle of soda in one corner. But something is strange. To go with the soda, someone also put down a metal water pitcher and two empty porcelain tea cups. Outside, a deep red stain spills out from under the dog kennel like it's a punctured Dr. Pepper. These details don't add up to what people do – this isn't the way people live. It doesn't even look like anyone else is around. Silent Hill seems like a ghost town, but its fixed camera angles and random craters make you understand you're in no position to become sheriff. You have no authority here. You're caught between the bleeding jaws of solitude and something way beyond your comprehension.

"The liminal horror aspect of Silent Hill may be a large part of why it sticks with me," megafan and ÜberStrategist account director CJ Melendez says. His former horror site HellDescent.com caught the attention of Silent Hill producers Tomm Hulett and Devin Shatsky. It earned him a special thanks in 2012's Silent Hill: Downpour's credits. "No people, no sounds, just remnants of civilization," Melendez says.

Within the games, Silent Hill is as much a place as it is a spirit. The official Silent Hill lore guide Lost Memories, which Konami released alongside a 2003 Silent Hill 3 guidebook in Japan, says as much. A fan's English translation reminds us that even Silent Hill's early Indigenous population sensed a "mysterious power" brewing in the surrounding Toluca Lake and pine trees. But after colonizers filled Silent Hill with pestilence, serpentine prisons, and death, its thrumming energy was soon rewired into sacrificial cults and mysterious disappearances. Toluca Lake, though wonderfully expansive and silver in Silent Hill 2's introductory sequence, could not contain the heaping rot.

"On a visceral level, the town [of Silent Hill] represents all the nightmares that we have," Dead by Daylight creative director Dave Richard says, who worked on the asymmetrical survival horror game's Silent Hill chapter in 2020. "In many Silent Hill games, Silent Hill exists in two ways. It functions as both a conceivable slice of America, a sleepy town in Maine where you'd park and grab a crab cake, and as a mirage. Certain actions seamlessly send you to the parallel Otherworld, or Nightmare World, which channels its inhabitants' fears into twisted metal grates, dim hallways, and more monsters, with raw pink skin. This alternative Silent Hill is often barnacled in oppressive rust, as impossible to remove as a hair stuck in your mouth."

↓ Silent Hill's most recent mainstream appearance was as content added to Dead by Daylight

"That's something that struck me the first time I played Silent Hill one, that mechanic that we know Silent Hill for," Richard says. "You are in a world that is super scary, but you haven't seen nothing yet." With its nightmare modes, the Silent Hill games can observably connect its environmental design to its playable characters' emotions, and therefore your emotions. In Silent Hill 3, you feel disgruntled teenager Heather's nausea when a shopping mall's elevator, without warning, plunges her into the Nightmare. The unremarkable off-white corridors she was just gliding down have been replaced by cracked paint, and crude, jammed doors, all of it smeared in either old dirt or fresh flesh.

"What is this ... barbecued dog?" Heather says after walking into a room and observing, on top of a yellowing tablecloth and surrounded by decorative lettuce, a crispy dog with its head split into sausages.

It's an obvious bad dream. But sometimes Silent Hill is coyer about the horror it's hiding, and its subtle Nightmare environments can also be dizzyingly effective. "It's hard to beat Lakeview Hotel from Silent Hill 2," SFB Games' Vian says. "When you arrive at Lakeview Hotel, it's quiet and dusty. It's abandoned, but it's pretty well preserved. Perhaps too well preserved." As the willfully oblivious James Sunderland, you eventually stumble on a VCR and use it to play a stuttering old tape you've been hanging onto. Vaguely, through the sputtering static, you see James do what he's been burying – smother his ailing wife with a pillow. After this revelation, "you experience a much more intense version of the hotel," Vian continues. "The hallways are flooded, everything is rusty and it's all falling apart. But instead of this being the heightened Otherworld, you realize that this is probably what the Lakeview Hotel actually looks like now after years of being left to rot in the middle of the lake. The quiet, peaceful, preserved version you visited initially – that was the illusion."

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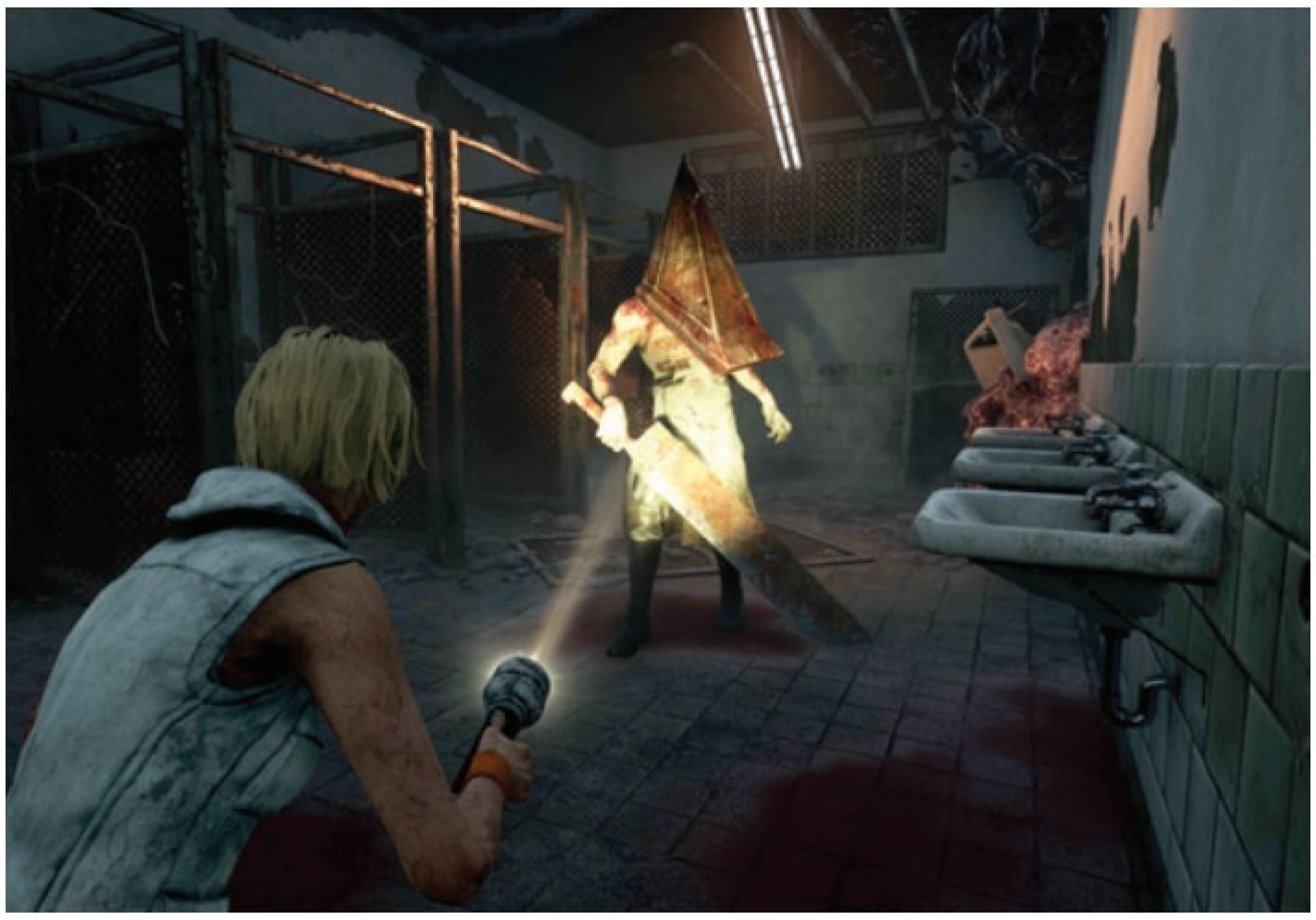
Pyramid Head and Silent Hill 3's Heather Morris recently made an appearance in Dead by Daylight



But, through its shapeshifting, Silent Hill retains its embodiment of decay and expanse, encouraging the sensation that anything can happen; for you, though, nothing is possible. You'd find its best real-world equivalents around the forest bends and collapsing 1920's houses in America's creaking Rust Belt, where I lived when I played Silent Hill for the first time. When I'd put the PlayStation controller down, thinking I would take a break from Silent Hill's trees and decay, I'd go outside and see the same in my neighborhood.

New installments in the series – the disastrous interactive drama Silent Hill Ascension, the middling free game Silent Hill: The Short Message – aren't set in the titular town, and they aren't the same. They're missing the strong environmental details that early Silent Hill games had, sticking you in the middle of drafty malls and hospitals that you feel like you remember, faintly, from a dream. Konami has tried branching out in other ways, too, like by wrangling its psychological horror series into the unpleasantly brown 2012 dungeon crawler Book of Memories for PlayStation Vita. All those games have proven that being in the town is crucial.

Silent Hill is tactile. Its hazy environments are packed with oxidizing metal, dining room table sets, cafes loaded with eroded vinyl seating – but its nightmare mode gives it an incredible knack for transmutation. Once you start spending time in

Silent Hill, you start seeing it everywhere. "There's a small town an hour north from my hometown that reminds me of Silent Hill when I pass through," 27-year-old Silent Hill fan Jacob Mauceri says. "As someone who has family that lives in old American towns all over the country, I always feel reminded of it pretty consistently. Even in the metaphorical sense, when I go through major and upsetting life events, the feeling is comparable to wading through a pool of fog."

"I think that, in some ways, the horror and the emotionally gray and weird vibes that Silent Hill brought me at that time brought me some kind of relief," agrees Outlast developer Red Barrels co-founder David Châteauneuf. "I was suffering from an anxiety disorder at the time, so I was not shocked by the Silent Hill vibe. Feeling lonely and alone in the fog was a bit how I felt, and Silent Hill was a place where I could fight my fears and succeed."

Though Silent Hill can inhabit many shapes and emotions, it has its limits. Its tricks and monsters are too idiosyncratic, as is its particular piece of Americana. "I'm still not too keen on Silent Hill: Short Message and Ascension being entirely set outside of Silent Hill," Melendez says. "To me, there has to be a connection to the town – whether that be a person or a thing – and this was the case up until recently." Even 25 years later, there's no place like Silent Hill. ■

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Silent Hill 2 (2001)

↘
Silent Hill (1999)

RET

by Wesley LeBlanc

URNING TO THE MAGIC

Nearly 10 years since the last entry and some stumbling blocks along the way, BioWare aims to recapture the spirit of its storied past with **Dragon Age: The Veilguard**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** EA
DEVELOPER BioWare **RELEASE** Fall 2024

Throughout my research and preparation for a trip to BioWare's Edmonton, Canada, office for this cover story, I kept returning to the idea that its next game, Dragon Age: The Veilguard (formerly subtitled Dreadwolf) is releasing at a critical moment for the storied developer. The previous installment, Dragon Age: Inquisition, hit PlayStation, Xbox, and PC a decade ago. It was the win BioWare needed, following the 2012 release of Mass Effect 3 with its highly controversial and (for many) disappointing ending. Inquisition launched two years later, in 2014, to rave reviews and, eventually, various Game of the Year awards, almost as if a reminder of what the studio was capable of.

Now, in 2024, coincidentally, the next Dragon Age finds itself in a similar position. BioWare attempted a soft reboot of Mass Effect with Andromeda in 2017, largely seen as a letdown among the community, and saw its first live-service multiplayer attempt in 2019's Anthem flounder in the tricky waters of the genre; it aimed for a No Man's Sky-like turnaround with Anthem Next, but that rework was canceled in 2021. Like its predecessor, BioWare's next Dragon Age installment is not only a new release in a beloved franchise, but is another launch with the pressure of BioWare's prior misses; a game fans hope will remind them the old BioWare is still alive today.

"Having been in this industry for 25 years, you see hits and misses, and it's all about building off of those hits and learning from those misses," BioWare general manager Gary McKay, who's been with the studio since January 2020, tells me.

As McKay gives me a tour of the office, I can't help but notice how much Anthem is scattered around it. More than Mass Effect, more than Dragon Age, there's a lot of Anthem – posters, real-life replicas of its various Javelins, wallpaper, and more. Recent BioWare news stories tell of leads and longtime studio veterans laid off and others departing voluntarily. Veilguard's development practically began with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. When I ask McKay about the tumultuousness of BioWare and how he, as the studio manager, makes the team feel safe in the product it's developing, he says it's about centering on the creative vision. "[When] we have that relentless pursuit for quality, and we have passion and people in the right roles, a lot of the other stuff you're talking about just fades into the background."

That's a sentiment echoed throughout the team I speak to: Focus on what makes a BioWare game great and let Veilguard speak for itself. Though I had no expectations going in – it's been 10 years since the last Dragon Age, after all, and BioWare has been cagey about showing this game publicly – my expectations have been surpassed. This return to Thedas, the singular continent of the franchise, feels like both a warm welcome for returning fans and an impressive entry point for first-time players.

New Age, New Name

At the start of each interview, I address a dragon-sized elephant in the room with the game's leads. What was Dragon Age: Dreadwolf is now Dragon Age: The Veilguard. Why?

"These games are reflections of the teams that make them, and as part of that, it means we learn a lot about what the heart and soul of the game really is as we're developing it," Veilguard game director Corinne Busche tells me. "We quickly learned and realized that the absolute beating heart of this game is these authentic, diverse companions. And when we took a step back, as we always do, we always check our decisions and make sure they still represent the game we're trying to build."

Dreadwolf no longer did that, but each member of BioWare I speak to tells me The Veilguard does. And while I was initially abrasive to the change – lore aside, Dreadwolf is simply a cool name – I warmed up to The Veilguard.

Solas, a Loki-esque trickster member of the Elven pantheon of gods known as the Dread Wolf, created the Veil long ago while attempting to free the elves from their slave-like status in Thedas. This Veil is a barrier between the magical Fade and Thedas, banishing Elven gods and removing Elven immortality from the world. But players didn't know that in Inquisition, where he is introduced as a mage ally and companion. However, at the end of Inquisition's Trespasser DLC, which sets the stage for Veilguard, we learn in a shocking twist that Solas wants to destroy the Veil and restore Elves to their former glory. However, doing so would bring chaos to Thedas, and those who call it home, the people who eventually become The Veilguard, want to stop him.

"There's an analogy I like to use, which is, 'If you want to carve an elephant out of marble, you just take a piece of marble and remove everything that doesn't look like an elephant,'" Veilguard creative director John Epler says. "As we were building this game, it became really clear that it was less that we were trying to make The Veilguard and more like The Veilguard was taking shape as we built the game. Solas is still a central figure in it. He's still a significant character. But really, the focus shifts to the team.

"[We] realized Dreadwolf suggests a title focused on a specific individual, whereas The Veilguard, much like Inquisition, focuses more on the team."

Creating Your Rook

Veilguard's character creator is staggeringly rich, with a dizzying number of customizable options. Busche tells me that inclusivity is at the heart of it, noting that she believes everyone can create someone who represents them on-screen.

There are four races to choose from when customizing Rook, the new playable lead – Elves, Qunari, Humans, and Dwarves – and hundreds of options to customize your character beyond that. You can select pronouns separately from gender and adjust physical characteristics like height, shoulder width, chest size, glute and bulge size, hip width, how bloodshot your eyes are, how crooked your nose is, and so much more. There must be hundreds of sliders to customize these body proportions and features like skin hue, tone, melanin, and just about anything else you might adjust on a character. Oh, and there's nudity in Veilguard, too, which I learn firsthand while customizing my Rook.

"The technology has finally caught up to our ambition," Dragon Age series art director Matt Rhodes tells me as we decide on my warrior-class Qunari's backstory, which affects faction allegiance, in-game dialogue, and reputation standing – we choose the pirate-themed Lords of Fortune.

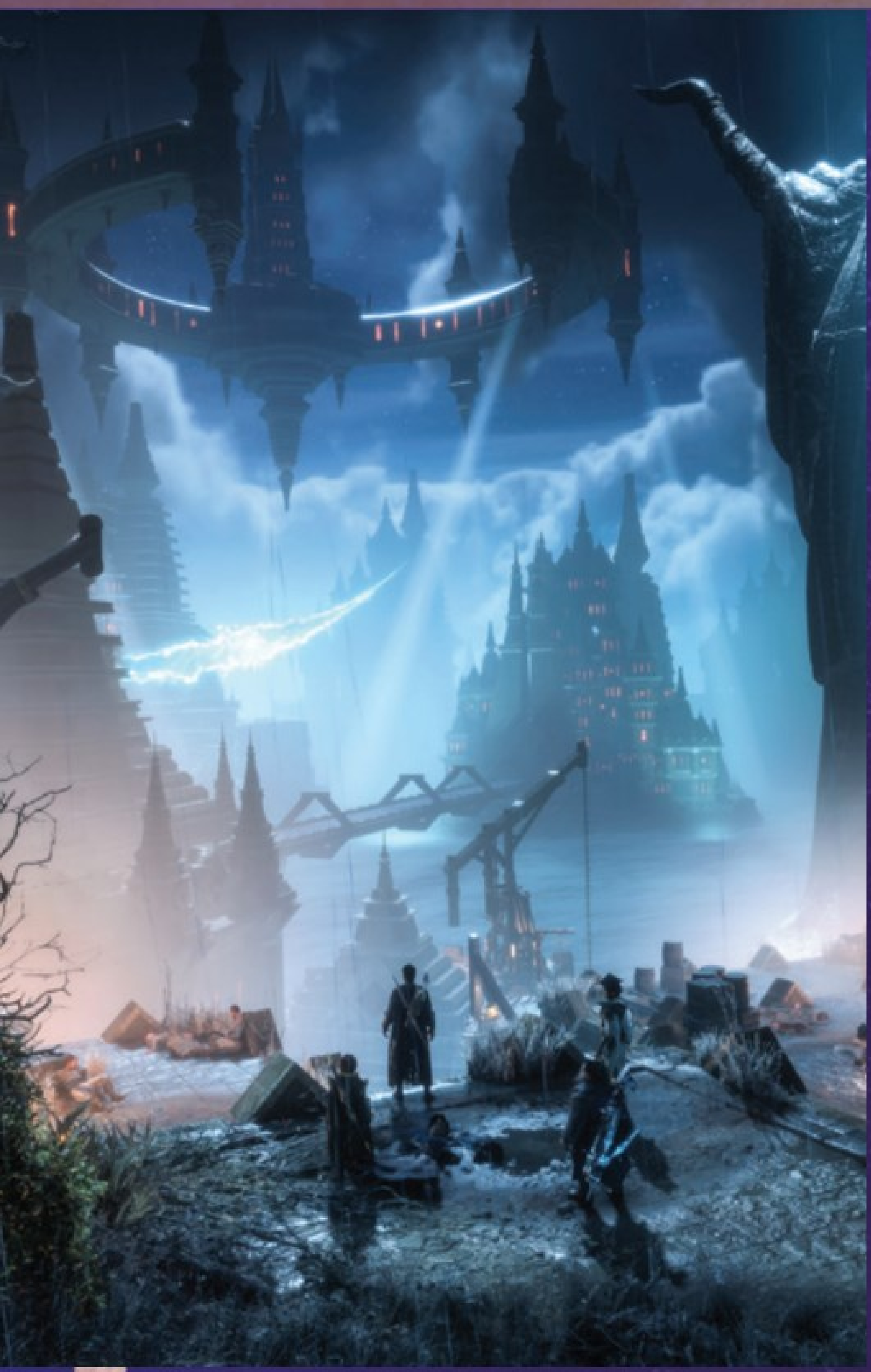
Notably, instead of a warrior class, we could have chosen mage or rogue. All three classes have unique specializations, bespoke skill trees, and special armors, too. And though our Rook is aligned with the Lords of Fortune faction, there are others to choose from including the Grey Wardens, Shadow Dragons, The Mourn Watch, and more. There is some flexibility in playstyle thanks to specializations, but your class largely determines the kind of actions you can perform in combat.

"Rook ascends because of competency, not because of a magical McGuffin," BioWare core lead and Mass effect executive producer Michael Gamble tells me in contrast to Inquisition's destiny-has-chosen-you-characterization.

"Rook is here because they choose to be, and that speaks to the kind of character that we've built." Busche adds, "Someone needs to stop this, and Rook says, 'I guess that's me.'"

Beyond the on-paper greatness of this character creator, its customizability speaks to something repeated throughout my BioWare visit: Veilguard is a single-player, story-driven RPG. Or in other words, the type of game that made BioWare as storied as it is. McKay tells me the team explored a multiplayer concept early in development before scratching it to get back to BioWare basics. The final game will feature zero multiplayer and no microtransactions.

Happy to hear that, I pick our first and last name, then one of four voices, with a pitch shifter for each, too, and we're off to Minrathous.



Exploring Tevinter For The First Time

Throughout the Dragon Age series, parts of Thedas are discussed by characters and referenced by lore material but left to the imagination of players as they can't visit them. Veilguard immediately eschews this, setting its opening prologue mission in Minrathous, the capital of the Tevinter Empire. Frankly, I'm blown away by how good it looks. It's my first time seeing Veilguard in action and my first look at a Dragon Age game in nearly a decade. Time has treated this series well, and so has technology.

Epler, who's coming up on 17 years at BioWare, acknowledges that the franchise has always been at the will of its engine. Dragon Age: Origins and II's Eclipse Engine worked well for the time, but today, they show their age. Inquisition was BioWare's first go at EA's proprietary Frostbite engine – mind you, an engine designed for first-person shooters and decidedly not multi-character RPGs – and the team struggled there, too. Epler and Busche agree Veilguard is the first RPG where BioWare feels fully in command of Frostbite and, more generally, its vision for this world.

We begin inside a bar. Rook and Varric are looking for Neve Gallus, a detective mage somewhere in Minrathous. The first thing players will do once Veilguard begins is select a dialogue option, something the team says speaks to their vision of a story-forward, choice-driven adventure. After a quick bar brawl cutscene that demonstrates Rook's capabilities, there's another dialogue choice, and different symbols here indicate the type of tone you can roll with. There's a friendly, snarky, and rough-and-tough direct choice, and I later learn of a more romantically inclined "emotional" response. These are the replies that will build relationships with characters, romantic and platonic alike, but you're welcome to ignore this option. However, your companions can romance each other, so giving someone the cold shoulder might nudge them into the warm embrace of another. We learn Neve is in Dumat Plaza and head into the heart of Minrathous.

Rhodes explains BioWare's philosophy for designing this city harkens back to a quick dialogue from Inquisition's Dorian Pavus. Upon entering Halamshiral's Winter Palace, the largest venue in Dragon Age history at that point, Dorian notes that it's cute, adorable even, alluding to his Tevinter heritage. If Dorian thinks the largest venue in Dragon Age history is cute and adorable, what must the place he's from be like? "It's like this," Rhodes says as we enter Minrathous proper in-game.

Minrathous is huge, painted in magical insignia that looks like cyberpunk-inspired neon city signs and brimming with detail. Knowing it's a city run by mages and built entirely upon magic, Rhodes says the team let its imagination run wild. The result is the most stunning and unique city in the series. Down a wide, winding pathway, there's a pub with a dozen NPCs – Busche says BioWare used Veilguard's character creator to make each in-world NPC except for specific characters like recruitable companions – and a smart use of verticality, scaling, and wayfinding to push us toward the main attraction: Solas, attempting to tear down the Veil.

All hell is breaking loose. Pride Demons are rampaging through the city. Considering Pride Demons were bosses in prior games, seeing them roaming freely in the prologue of Veilguard speaks to the stakes of this opener. Something I appreciate throughout our short journey through Minrathous to its center below is the cinematography at play. As a Qunari, my character stands tall, and Rhodes says the camera adjusts to ensure larger characters loom over those below. On the flip side, the camera adjusts for dwarves to demonstrate their smaller stature compared to those around them.

THE VEILGUARD WHO'S WHO

While we learned a lot about returning character but first-time companion Lace Harding, ice mage private detective Neve Gallus, and veil jumper Bellara Lutara, BioWare shared some additional details about other companions Rook will meet later in the game. Davrin is a charming Grey Warden who is also an excellent monster hunter; Emmrich is a member of Nevarra's Mourn Watch and a necromancer with a skeleton assistant named Manfred; Lucanis is a pragmatic assassin whose bloodline descends from the criminal House of Crows organization; And Taash is a dragon hunter allied with the piratic Lords of Fortune. All seven of these characters adorn this *Game Informer* issue, with Bellara up front and center in the spotlight.

This, coupled with movie-like movements through the city as BioWare showcases the chaos happening at the hands of Solas' Veil-break ritual, creates a cinematic start that excites me, and I'm not even hands-on with the game.

Eventually, we reach Neve, who has angered some murderous blood mages, and rescue her from danger. Or rather, help… barely. Neve is quite capable, and her well-acted dialogue highlights that. Together, Varric, returning character Lace Harding, who is helping us stop Solas and is now a companion, Rook, and Neve defeat some demons. They then take on some Venatori Cultists seizing this chaotic opportunity to take over the city and other enemies before making it to Solas' hideout. As we traverse deeper and deeper into this hideout, more of Solas' murals appear on the walls, and things get more Elven. Rhodes says this is because you're symbolically going back in time, as Minrathous is a city built by mages on the bones of what was originally the home of Elves.

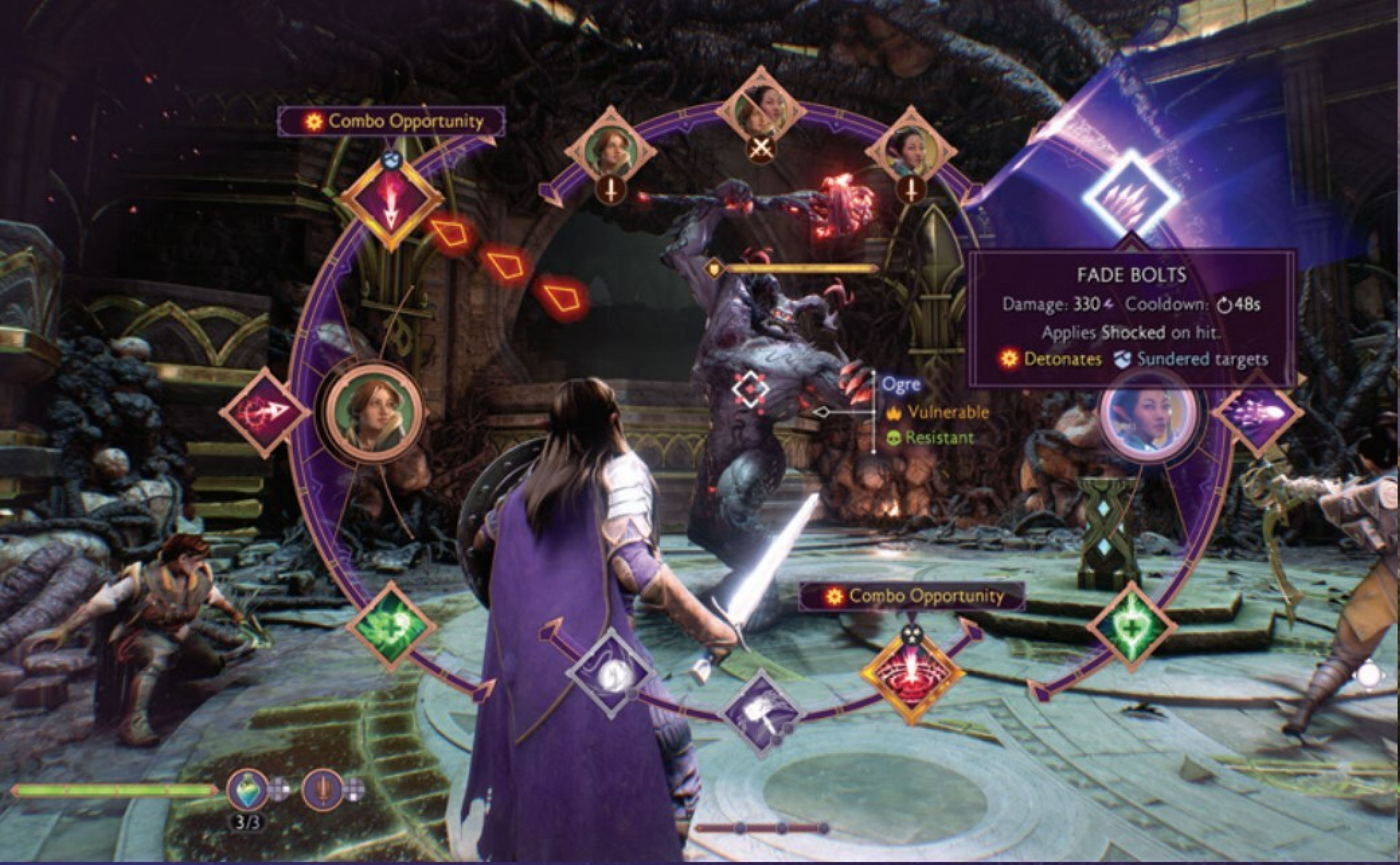
At the heart of his hideout, we discover Solas' personal Eluvian. This magical mirror-like structure allows the gang to teleport (and mechanically fast-travel) to Arlathan Forest, where Solas is secretly performing the ritual (while its effects pour out into Minrathous).

Here, we encounter a dozen or so demons, which BioWare has fully redesigned on the original premise of these monstrous creatures. Rhodes says they're creatures of feeling and live and die off the emotions around them. As such, they are just a floating nervous system, pushed into this world from the Fade, rapidly assembled into bodies out of whatever scraps they find.

I won't spoil the sequence of events here, but we stop Solas' ritual and seemingly save the world… for now. Rook passes out moments later and wakes up in a dream-like landscape to the voice of none other than Solas. He explains a few drops of Rook's blood interacted with the ritual, connecting them to the Fade forever. He also says he was attempting to move the Elgar'nan and Ghilan'nain, part of the Evanuris or Elven gods of ancient times, to a new prison because the one he had previously constructed was failing. Unfortunately, Solas is trapped in the Fade by our doing, and these gods are now free. It's up to Rook to stop them; thus, the stage for our adventure is set.

The Lighthouse

After their encounter with Solas, Rook wakes up with Harding and Neve in the lair of the Dread Wolf himself, a special magical realm in the Fade called the Lighthouse. It's a towering structure centered amongst various floating islands. Epler says, much like Skyhold in Inquisition, the Lighthouse is where your team bonds, grows, and prepares for its adventures throughout the campaign. It also becomes more functional and homier as you do. Already, though, it's a beautifully distraught headquarters for the Veilguard, although they aren't quite referring to themselves as that just yet.



Because it was Solas' home base of operations, it's gaudy, with his fresco murals adorning various walls, greenery hanging from above, and hues of purple and touches of gold everywhere. Since it's in the Fade, a realm of dreams that responds to your world state and emotion, the Lighthouse reflects the chaos and disrepair of the Thedas you were in moments ago. I see a clock symbol over a dialogue icon in the distance, which signals an optional dialogue option. We head there, talk to Neve, select a response to try our hand at flirting, and then head to the dining hall.

A plate, a fork and knife, and a drinking chalice are at the end of a massive table. Rhodes says this is both a funny (and sad) look at Solas' isolated existence and an example of the detail BioWare's art team has put into Veilguard. "It's a case of letting you see the story," he says. "It's like when you go to a friend's house and see their bedroom for the first time; you get to learn more about them." From the dining hall, we gather the not-quite-Veilguard in the library, which Busche says is the central area of the Lighthouse and where your party will often regroup and prepare for what's next. The team decides it must reach the ritual site back in Arlathan Forest, and Busche says I'm missing unique dialogue options here because I'm Qunari; an Elf would have more to say about the Fade due to their connection to it. The same goes for my backstory earlier in Minrathous. If I had picked the Shadow Dragons background, Neve would have recognized me immediately, with unique dialogue.

With our next move decided, we head to Solas' Eluvian to return to Arlathan Forest and the ritual site. However, it's not fully functional without Solas, and while it returns us to Arlathan Forest, it's not exactly where we want to go. A few moments later, we're back in the Arlathan Forest, and just before a demon-infested suit of mechanized armor known as a Sentinel can attack, two new NPCs appear to save us: Strife and Irelin. Harding recognizes them, something Dragon Age comic readers might know about. They're experts in ancient elven magic and part of the new Veil Jumpers faction. The ensuing cutscene, where we learn Strife and Irelin need help finding someone named Bellara Lutara, is long, with multiple dialogue options. That's something I'm noticing with Veilguard, too – there's a heavy emphasis on storytelling and dialogue, and it feels deep and meaty, like a good fantasy novel. BioWare doesn't shy away from minutes-long cutscenes.

Busche says that's intentional, too. "For Rook, [this story's about] what does it mean to be a leader," she says. "You're defining their leadership style with your choices." Knowing that Rook is the leader of the Veilguard, I'm excited to see how far this goes. From the sound of it, my team will react to my chosen leadership style in how my relationships play out. That's demonstrated within the game's dialogue and a special relationship meter on each companion's character screen.

Redefining Combat Once More

Bellara is deep within Arlathan Forest, and following the prologue's events, something is up here. Three rings of massive rocks fly through the air, protecting what appears to be a central fortress. Demon Sentinels plague the surrounding lands, and after loading up a new save, we're in control of a human mage.

Following the trend of prior Dragon Age games, Veilguard has completed the series' shift from tactical strategy to real-time action, but fret not: a tactical pause-and-play mechanic returns to satiate fans who remember the series' origins (pun intended). Though I got a taste of combat in the prologue, Veilguard's drastic departure from all that came before it is even more apparent here.

Busche says players complete every swing in real-time, with special care taken to animation swing-through and canceling. There's a dash, a parry, the ability to charge moves, and a completely revamped healing system that allows you to use potions at your discretion by hitting right on the d-pad. You can combo attacks and even "bookmark" combos with a quick dash, which means you can pause a combo's status with a dash to safety and continue the rest of the combo afterward. It looks even cooler than it sounds.

Like any good action game, there is a handful of abilities to customize your kit. And, if you want to maintain that real-time action feel, you can use them on the fly, so long as you take cooldowns into effect. But Veilguard's pause-and-play gameplay mechanic, similar to Inquisition's without the floating camera view, lets you bring things to a halt for a healthy but optional dose of strategy.

In this screen, which essentially pauses the camera and pulls up a flashy combat wheel that highlights you and your companions' skills, you can choose abilities, queue them up, and strategize with synergies and combos, all while targeting specific enemies. Do what you need to here, let go of the combat wheel, and watch your selections play out. Busche says she uses the combat wheel to dole out her companions' attacks and abilities while sticking to the real-time action for her player-controlled Rook. On the other hand, Epler says he almost exclusively uses the combat wheel to dish out every ability and combo.

Busche says each character will play the same, in that you execute light and heavy attacks with the same buttons, use abilities with the same buttons, and interact with the combo wheel in the same way, regardless of which class you select. But a sword-and-shield warrior, like we used in the prologue, can hip-fire or aim their shield to throw it like Captain America, whereas our human mage uses that same button to throw out magical ranged attacks. The warrior can parry incoming attacks,

PRESSING START

The start or pause screen is as important to a good RPG as the game outside the menus. Veilguard's contains your map, journal, character sheets, skill tree, and a library for lore information. You can cross-compare equipment and equip new gear here for Rook and your companions, build weapon loadouts for quick change-ups mid-combat, and customize you and your party's abilities and builds via an easy-to-understand skill tree. You won't find minutiae here, "just real numbers," Busche says. That means a new unlocked trait might increase damage by 25 percent against armor, but that's as in-depth as the numbers get. Passive abilities unlock jump attacks and guarantee critical hit opportunities, while abilities add moves like a Wall of Fire to your arsenal (if you're a mage). As you spec out this skill tree, which is 100 percent bespoke to each class, you'll work closer to unlocking a specialization, of which there are three for each class, complete with a unique ultimate ability. Busche says BioWare's philosophy here is "about changing the way you play, not statistical minutiae."

which can stagger enemies. The rogue gets a larger parry window. Our mage, however, can't parry at all. Instead, they throw up a shield that blocks incoming attacks automatically so long as you have the mana to sustain it.

"What I see from Veilguard is a game that finally bridges the gap," former Dragon Age executive producer Mark Darrah, who left BioWare in 2021 before joining the Veilguard team last year as a consultant, tells me. "Uncharitably, previous Dragon Age games got to the realm of 'combat wasn't too bad.' In this game, the combat's actually fun, but it does keep that thread that's always been there. You have the focus on Rook, on your character, but still have that control and character coming into the combat experience from the other people in the party."

"This is really the best Dragon Age game that I've ever played," he adds, noting his bias. "This is the one where we get back to our roots of character-driven storytelling, have really fun combat, and aren't making compromises."

Watching Busche take down sentinels and legions of darkspawn onscreen, I can already sense Veilguard's combat will likely end up my favorite in the series, although admittedly, as a fan of action games, I'm an easy sell here. It's flashy, quick, and, thanks to different types of health bars, like a greenish-blue one that represents barrier and is taken down most effectively with ranged attacks, a decent amount of strategy, even if you don't use the pause-and-play combo wheel. Like the rest of the game, too, it's gorgeous, with sprinkles, droplets, and splashes of magic in each attack our mage unleashes. Though I'm seeing the game run on a powerful PC, which is sure to be the best showcase of Veilguard, Epler tells me the game looks amazing on consoles – he's been playing it on PlayStation 5 and enjoying it in both its fidelity and performance modes, but I'll have to take his word for it.

In Entropy's Grasp

As we progress through the forest and the current "In Entropy's Grasp" mission, we finally find Bellara. She's a veil jumper, the first companion you meet and recruit in-game (unlike Neve, who automatically joins), and the centerpiece of this issue's cover image. Because our mage's background is Veil Jumper, we get some unique dialogue. Bellara explains we're all trapped in a Veil Bubble, and there's no way out once you pass through it. Despite the dire situation, Bellara is bubbly, witty, and charming.

"When designing companions, they're the load-bearing pillars for everything," Rhodes says. "They're the face of their faction, and in this case [with Bellara], their entire area of the world. She's your window into Arlathan Forest." Rhodes describes her as a sweetheart and nerd for ancient elven artifacts. As such, she's dressed more like an academic than a combat expert, although her special arm gauntlet is useful both for tinkering with her environment and taking down enemies.

Unlike Neve, who uses ice magic like our Rook and can slow down time with a special ability, Bellara specializes in electricity, and she can also use magic to heal you, something Busche says

Dragon Age fans have been desperate to have in a game. Busche says if you don't direct Neve and Bellara, they're fully independent and will attack on their own. But synergizing your team will add to the fun and strategy of combat. Bellara's electric magic is effective against Sentinels, which is great because we currently only have access to ice. However, without Bellara, we could also equip a rune that converts my ice magic, for a brief duration, into electricity to counter the Sentinels.

As we progress through Arlathan Forest, we encounter more and more darkspawn. Bellara mentions the darkspawn have never been this far before because the underground Deep Roads, where they usually escape from, aren't nearby. However, with blighted Elven gods roaming the world, and thanks to Blight's radiation-like spread, it's a much bigger threat in Veilguard than in any Dragon Age before it.

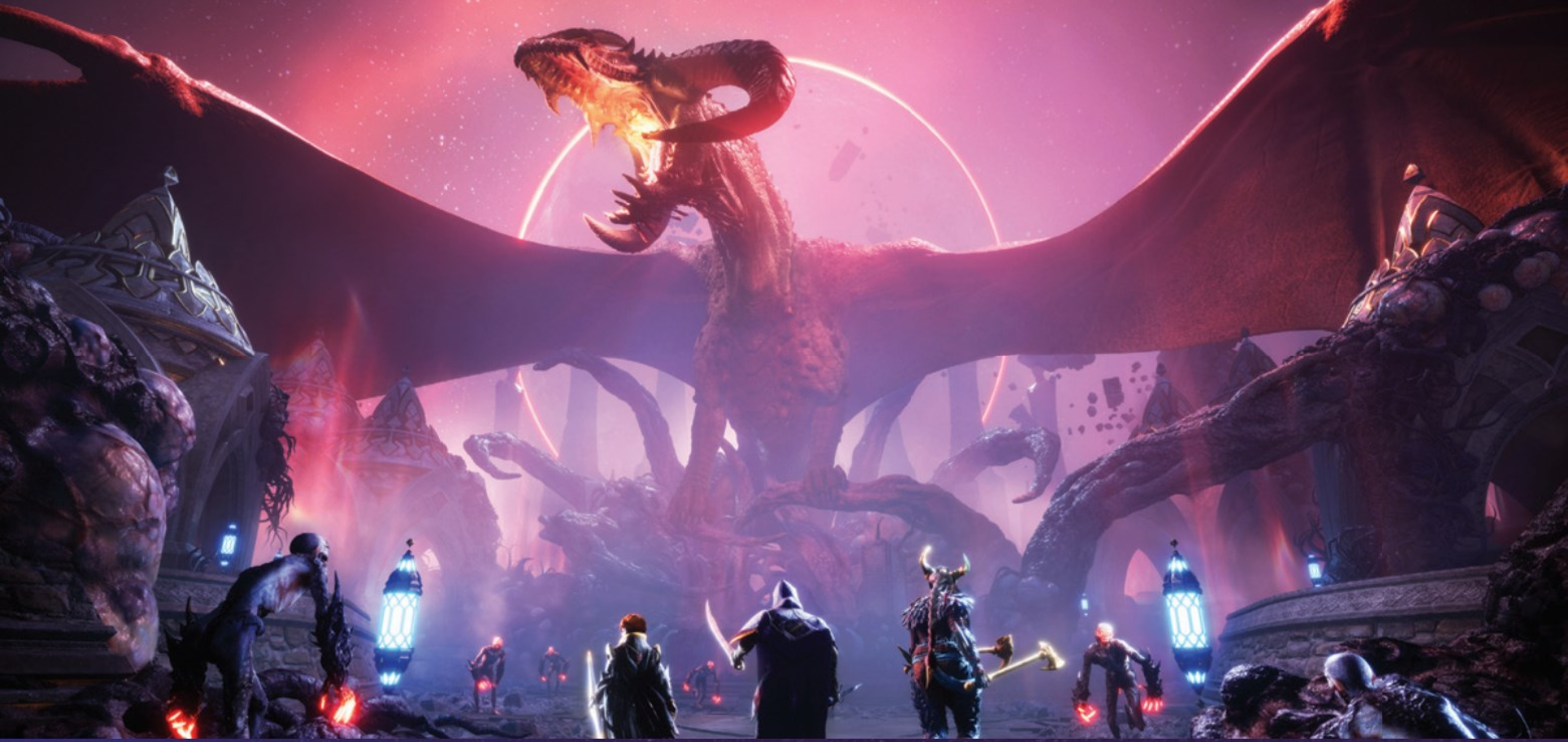
I continue to soak in the visuals of Veilguard with Arlathan Forest's elven ruins, dense greenery, and disgusting Blight tentacles and pustules; it's perhaps the most impressive aspect of my time seeing the game, although everything else is making a strong impression, too. I am frustrated about having to watch the game rather than play it, to be honest. I'm in love with the art style, which is more high fantasy than anything in the series thus far and almost reminiscent of the whimsy of Fable, a welcome reprieve from the recent gritty Game of Thrones trend in fantasy games. Rhodes says that's the result of the game's newfound dose of magic.

"The use of magic has been an evolution as the series has gone on," he says. "It's something we've been planning for a while because Solas has been planning all this for a while. In the past, you could hint at cooler magical things in the corner because you couldn't actually go there, but now we actually can, and it's fun to showcase that."

Busche, Epler, and Rhodes warn me that Arlathan Forest's whimsy will starkly contrast to other areas. They promise some grim locations and even grimmer story moments because, without that contrast, everything falls flat. Busche likens it to a "thread of optimism" pulled through otherworldly chaos ravaging Thedas. For now, the spunky and effervescent Bellara is that thread.

COMPANION CUSTOMIZATION

You can advance your bonds by helping companions on their own personal quests and by including them in your party for main quests. Every Relationship Level you rank up, shown on their character sheet, nets you a skill point to spend on them. Busche says the choices you make, what you say to companions, how you help them, and more all matter to their development as characters and party members. And with seven companions, there's plenty to customize, from bespoke gear to abilities and more. Though each companion has access to five abilities, you can only take three into combat, so it's important to strategize different combos and synergies within your party. Rhodes says beyond this kind of customizable characterization, each companion has issues, problems, and personal quests to complete. "Bellara has her own story arc that runs parallel to and informs the story path you're on," Rhodes says.



As we progress deeper into the forest, Bellara spots a floating fortress and thinks the artifact needed to destroy the Veil Bubble is in there. To reach it, though, we must remove the floating rock rings, and Bellara's unique ability, Tinker, can do just that by interacting with a piece of ancient elven technology nearby. Busche says Rook can acquire abilities like Tinker later to complete such tasks in instances where Bellara, for example, isn't in the party.

Bellara must activate three of these in Arlathan Forest to reach the floating castle, and each one we activate brings forth a slew of sentinels, demons, and darkspawn to defeat. Busche does so with ease, showcasing high-level gameplay by adding three stacks of arcane build-up to create an Arcane Bomb on an enemy, which does devastating damage after being hit by a heavy attack. Now, she begins charging a heavy attack on her magical staff, then switches to magical daggers in a second loadout accessed with a quick tap of down on the d-pad to unleash some quick attacks, then back to the staff to charge it some more and unleash a heavy attack.

After a few more combat encounters, including one against a sentinel that's "Frenzied," which means it hits harder, moves faster, and has more health, we finally reach the center of the temple. Within is a particular artifact known as the Nadas Dirthalen, which Bellara says means "the inevitability of knowledge." Before we can advance with it, a darkspawn Ogre boss attacks. It hits hard, has plenty of unblockable, red-coded attacks, and a massive shield we must take down first. However, it's weak to fire, and our new fire staff is perfect for the situation.

After taking down this boss in a climactic arena fight, Bellara uses a special crystal to power the artifact and remove it from a pedestal, destroying the Veil Bubble. Then, the Nadas Dirthalen comes alive as an Archive Spirit, but because the crystal used to power it breaks, we learn little about this spirit before it disappears. Fortunately, Bellara thinks she can fix it – fixing broken stuff is kind of her thing, Epler says – so the group heads back to the Veil Jumper camp and, as interested as I am in learning what happens next, the demo ends. It's clear that even after a few hours with the game's opening, I've seen a nigh negligible amount of game; frustrating but equally as exciting.

DON'T CALL IT AN OPEN WORLD

Veilguard is not an open world, even if some of its explorable areas might feel like one. Gamble describes Veilguard's Thedas as a hub-and-spoke design where "the needs of the story are served by the level design." A version of Inquisition's Crossroads, a network of teleporting Eluvians, returns, and it's how players will traverse across northern Thedas. Instead of a connected open world, players will travel from Eluvian to Eluvian to different stretches of this part of the continent. This allows BioWare to go from places like Minrathous to tropical beaches to Arlathan Forest to grim and gothic areas and elsewhere. Some of these areas are larger and full of secrets and treasures. Others are smaller and more focused on linear storytelling. Arlathan Forest is an example of this, but there are still optional paths and offshoots to explore for loot, healing potion refreshes, and other things. There's a minimap in each location, though linear levels like "In Entropy's Grasp" won't have the fog of war that disappears as you explore like some of Veilguard's bigger locations. Regardless, BioWare says Veilguard has the largest number of diverse biomes in series history.

Dragon's Delight

With a 10-hour day at BioWare behind me after hours of demo gameplay and interviews with the leads, I'm acutely aware of my favorite part of video games: the surprises. I dabbled with Origins and II and put nearly 50 hours into Inquisition, but any familiarity with the series the latter gave me had long since subsided over the past decade. I wanted to be excited about the next Dragon Age as I viewed each teaser and trailer, but other than seeing the words "Dragon Age," I felt little. Without gameplay, without a proper look at the actual game we'll all be playing this fall, I struggled to remember why Inquisition sucked me in 10 years ago.

This trip reminded me.

Dragon Age, much like the Thedas of Veilguard, lives in the uncertainty: The turbulence of BioWare's recent release history and the lessons learned from it, the drastic changes to each Dragon Age's combat, the mystery of its narrative, and the implications of its lore. It's all a part of the wider Dragon Age story and why this studio keeps returning to this world. It's been a fertile franchise for experimentation. While Veilguard is attempting to branch out in unique ways, it feels less like new soil and more like the harvest BioWare has been trying to cultivate since 2009, and I'm surprised by that.

I'm additionally surprised, in retrospect, how numb I've been to the game before this. I'm surprised by BioWare's command over EA's notoriously difficult Frostbite engine to create its prettiest game yet. I'm surprised by this series' 15-year transition from tactical strategy to action-forward combat. I'm surprised by how much narrative thought the team has poured into these characters, even for BioWare. Perhaps having no expectations will do that to you. But most of all, with proper acknowledgment that I reserve additional judgment until I actually play the game, I'm surprised that Veilguard might just be the RPG I'm looking forward to most this year. ■

For video interviews, additional features, and more, visit GameInformer.com/DragonAgeTheVeilguard

REPLICAT Results

11 Bit Studios invites you to explore life's what-ifs in its sci-fi survival game The Alters

D

ING

by Brian Shea

Do you ever lie awake at night, replaying key decisions you've made in your life? Do you ever wonder how your life could have played out had you made a different choice in those key moments? The Alters, the latest game from the team behind the critically acclaimed This War of Mine, not only poses those questions, but builds upon them with meaningful gameplay mechanics and systems.

In a rock-bottom moment, Jan Dolski takes a job with Ally Corp, a corporation exploring the furthest reaches of space in hopes of mining incredible elements not found in our solar system. Ally Corps' advanced Quantum Navigation System tells Jan's captain that Rapidium, a highly unstable, radioactive element with untold properties, is on a planet in a nearby triple star system. However, things go horribly wrong, leading to Jan's entire team – including his captain – mysteriously dying on the descent to the planet.

Now, Jan finds himself in an impossible scenario; as the closest of the three suns rises, it scorches everything on which it shines. Jan needs to get the mobile base up and running so he can outrun the sunrise and reach the evac point, but doing so alone will prove insurmountable. However, Jan's not just going to roll over and die, so he pushes himself to overcome the harsh elements, dangerous radiation spikes, and the vast unknown that awaits him. In the process, he embarks on a new kind of journey of self-discovery and has some tough conversations with himself. Literally.

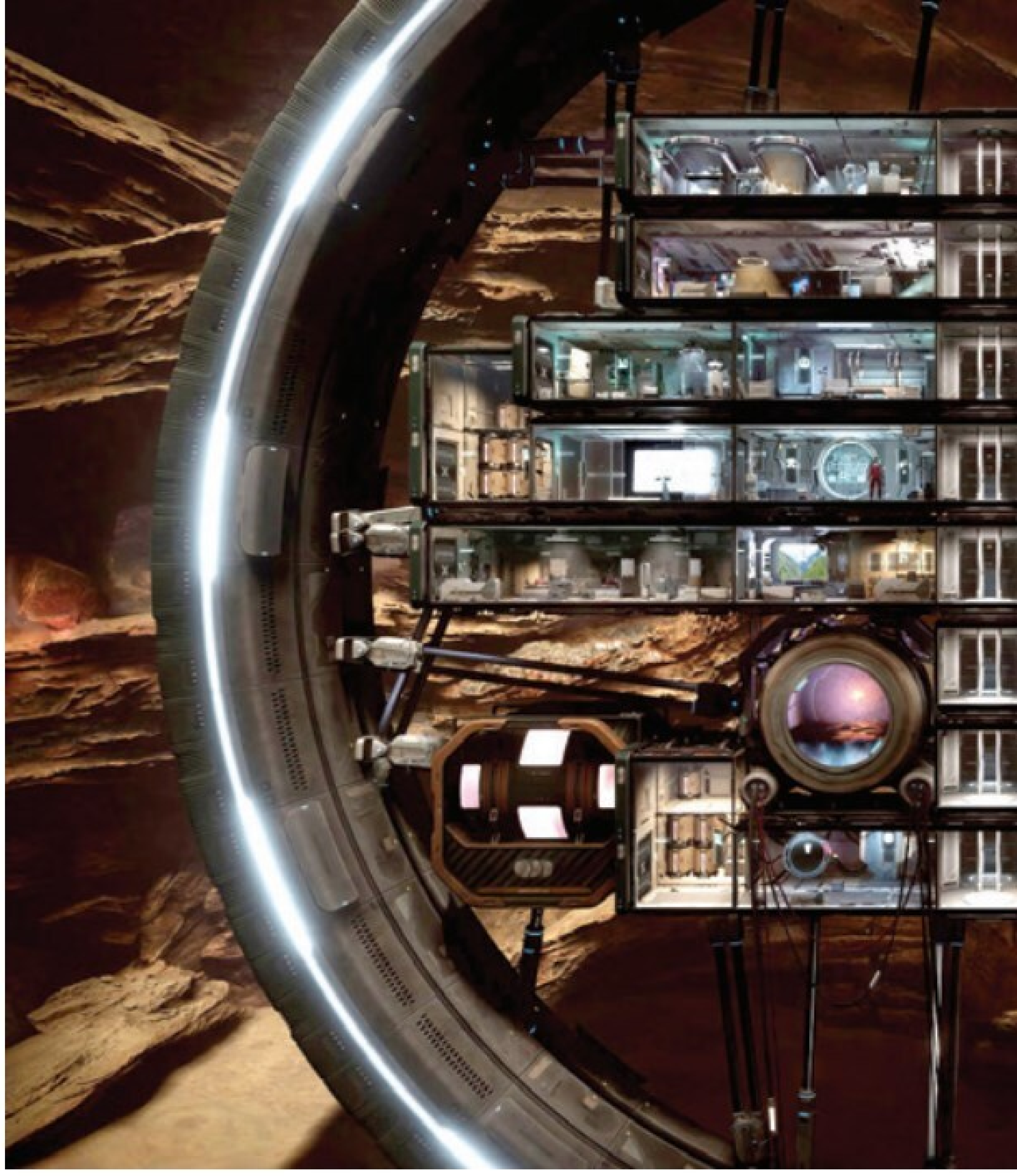
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER 11 Bit Studios **DEVELOPER** 11 Bit Studios **RELEASE** 2024

GETTING his BEARINGS

At its core, The Alters is a sci-fi survival game. After Jan and his team land on an unknown planet with a raging ocean full of an oily liquid, inhospitable atmospheric conditions, and grey, craggy cliffs, he realizes he's the only survivor. The red smoke from the pods' emergency flares starkly contrasts the monochrome environment in which they landed. After finding his captain's pod, he realizes that not only is she dead, but it looks like she died inside of it with no signs of harsh impact. The rest of the crew appears to have suffered the same fate on a nearby beach. To top it all off, his in-suit communications are also busted.

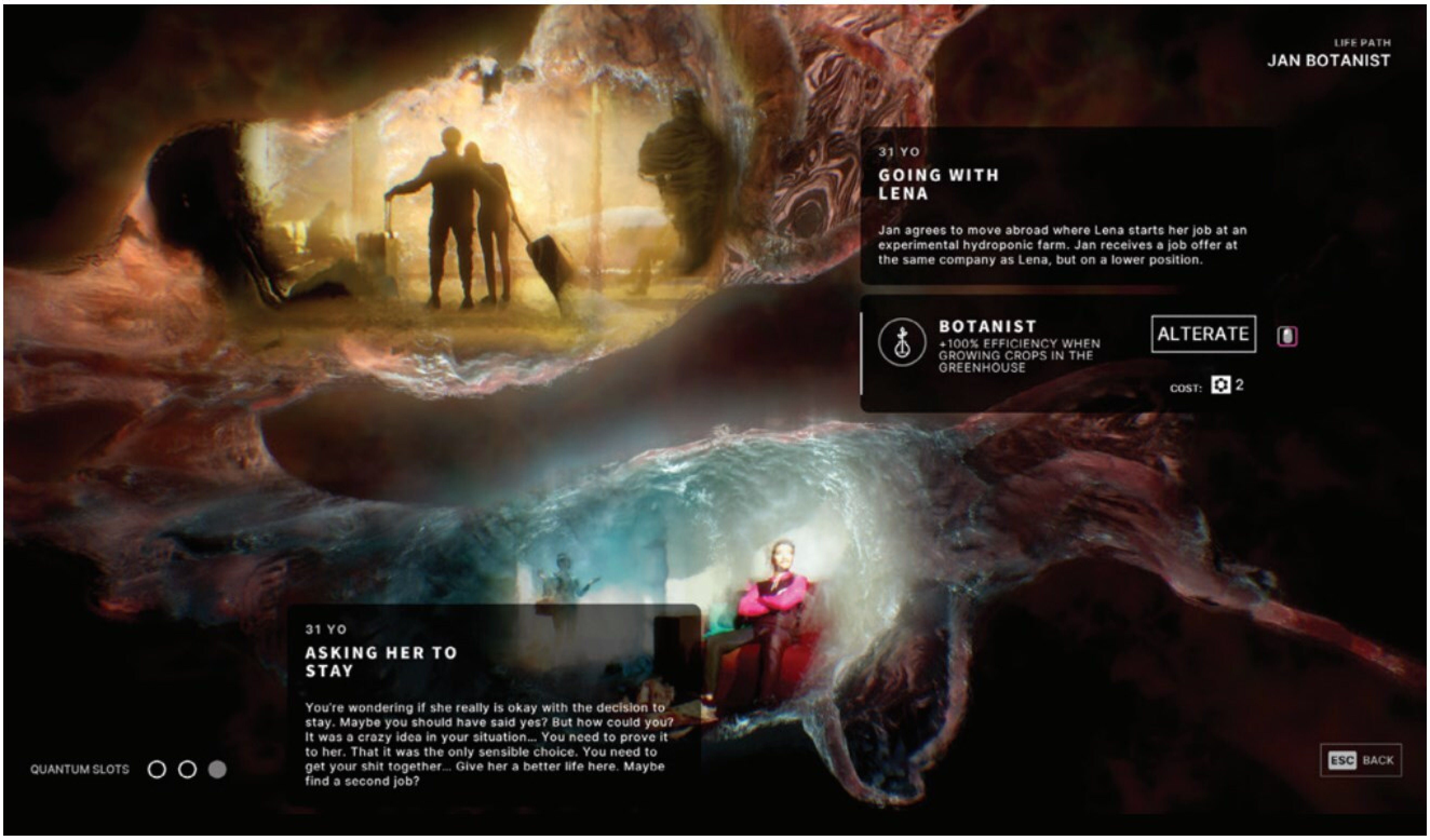
But Jan has no time to mourn or panic, as the radiation levels spike to dangerous levels each time one of the smaller suns sets, and it's just about that time. After sprinting to the giant, wheel-shaped mobile base, he steps into the elevator airlock just in time to avoid the dangers of the radiation wave.

As Jan enters the base, the solitude sets in. The third-person camera from the planet's surface swings out to a side view. With the press of a button, you can zoom way out, revealing the layout of the base. Full of different functioning rooms like a kitchen, bedroom, engine room, storage rooms, and a quantum computer, the mobile base has plenty of activities to participate in, and its functionality only increases thanks to XCOM-style base-building mechanics.



However, before I dive into that, Jan tries to contact Ally Corp to give an update on the catastrophic turn of events that just took place, so I navigate him to the communications room.

The only caller available is listed as "Unknown," so I dial that. Sadly, the comms tech in the base is also busted, as it's mostly static on the other end. Through the white noise and distorted sounds, Jan does make out phrases like "planet activity rising," "lethal proximity," and "must escape." Comforting



31 YO

GOING WITH LENA

Jan agrees to move abroad where Lena starts her job at an experimental hydroponic farm. Jan receives a job offer at the same company as Lena, but on a lower position.

BOTANIST

+100% EFFICIENCY WHEN GROWING CROPS IN THE GREENHOUSE

COST: 2

31 YO

ASKING HER TO STAY

You're wondering if she really is okay with the decision to stay. Maybe you should have said yes? But how could you? It was a crazy idea in your situation... You need to prove it to her. That it was the only sensible choice. You need to get your shit together... Give her a better life here. Maybe find a second job?

first words to hear after the traumatic events he just experienced, I'm sure.

Jan pieces together that one of the three suns near the planet he's on is set to rise on his location in just over a week, and when it does, it's close enough to kill anything its light touches, so he needs to head in the opposite direction to stay out of its rays. He'll never make it on foot, so he must get the mobile base operational again. To obtain the resources required to get things up and running, Jan must venture out into the planet's surface to mine for metals and organic materials.

Metal, indicated by red dust, is simple enough to harvest. Since it can be found on the surface, Jan can approach it and secure it by hand. Organic materials, on the other hand, are beneath the surface, so Jan must build a mining outpost by scanning for organics, indicated by blue smoke, constructing an outpost, then building pylons back to the base. It's more work, but once it's built, you can fast-travel between the base and outpost – which will come in handy when those radiation waves kick up.

Back at the base, I use the metals Jan gathered to build a workshop with the base-building mechanics, allowing me to craft tools and components. Using the tile-based mechanics, I place it next to the comms room. However, I notice one corner of the base is a little crammed. Thankfully, it's a breeze to rearrange the room tiles on the fly; as long as you keep all the rooms accessible, you can drag and drop the configuration however you like.

Playing through several days of The Alters, my impressions tell me that this is a standard survival game with a compelling loop. For most games, that cyclical gameplay is enough. However, for The Alters, it's just the backdrop to the most compelling part of the game: its namesake.

Altering HISTORY

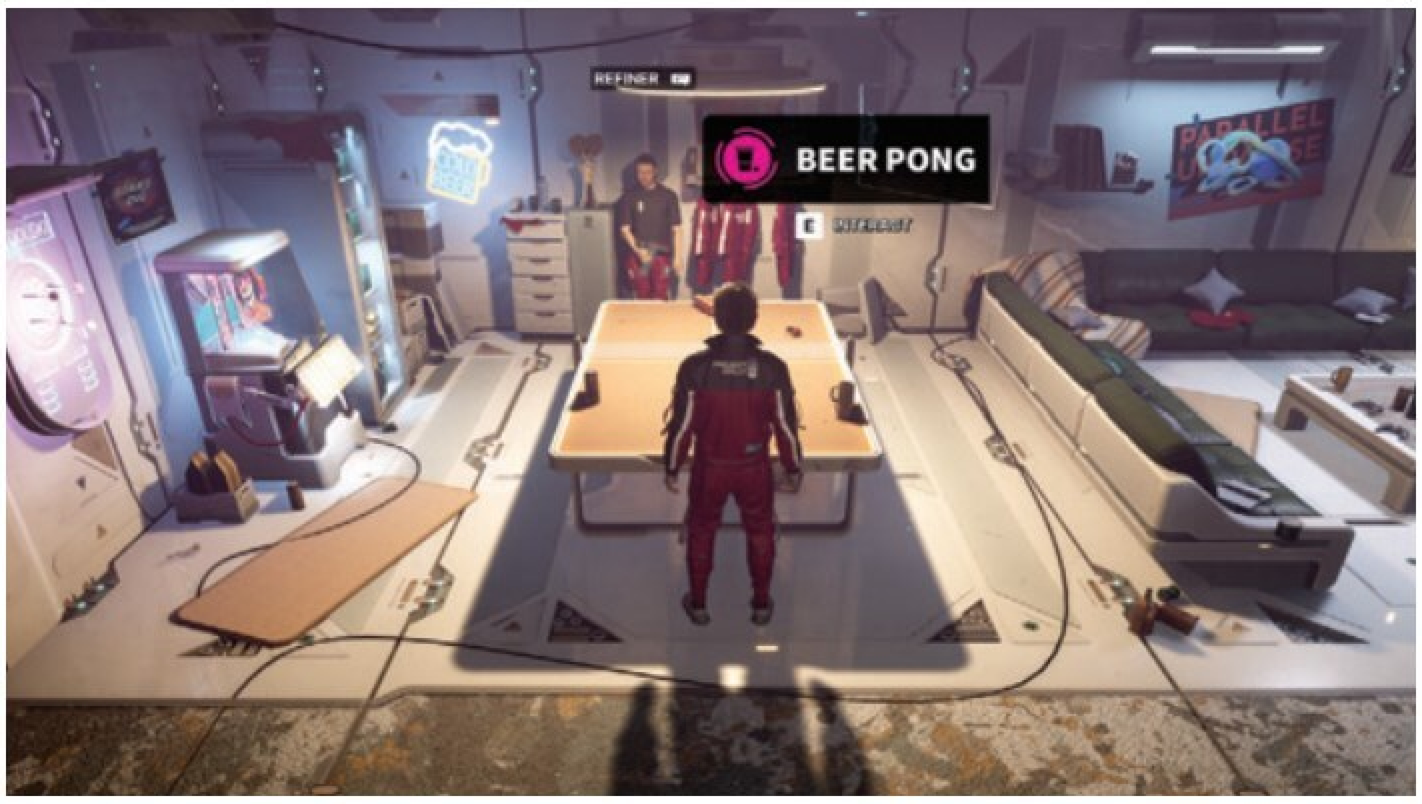
On one expedition to the planet's surface, I notice strange – what appear to be – beams of light coming out of the ground. At first, I wonder if it's a visual glitch in the pre-release build I'm playing, but as I walk further into the cave, the effect intensifies before coming into bloom around one corner. Jan wonders if this is the Rapidium his company was searching for when they sent his team to this planet. He gathers a sample and returns to the base to tell the person on the other side of the phone.

The person provides Jan with a room blueprint for a "womb." Thanks to all the materials I've already collected, I can build it immediately. After depositing some DNA provided by the caller and some of the Rapidium I collected, the true power of this alien element is revealed as a sheep emerges from the womb. It's an amazing feat, but it's a small victory; after all, Jan still needs to get this mobile base operational.

After trying to start the engine, he's greeted only with smoke. Frustrated, he hops on the comms again. Instead of getting to vent, the caller barely sneaks "Rapidium can save you" through the static, and he unlocks the as-of-yet unused Quantum Computer. Jan heads down to the room that houses the computer and finds all the crew's records have been deleted ... except for his.

He accesses his record and makes an eerie discovery: a timeline of his entire life. This Mind Record stretches all the way back to Jan's childhood, complete with crucial decisions he has made – the ones he still reflects on during his quiet moments.

"We really wanted this character to be relatable, and at the same time, it had to be one specific person," game director Tomasz Kisilewicz says. "We knew it should be a person who is unfulfilled and has a lot of regrets and feels like his life could be better. He feels like he underperforms. That's why we have this guy in his mid-30s, who feels like he should be a better provider, and he has so many faults, traps in his mind that makes him feel this way about himself."



I see Jan's choice to ignore a mugging he saw on the street as a teen, his decision to drop out of school, and his choice not to fight for his marriage. Despite Jan being such a specific character, several of the decision points in his timeline are inspired by past what-if scenarios that keep real people on the development team, their friends, partners, and family members awake at night.

"We had a whole list, and we were choosing different kinds so we really hope that by the end of the game, each player will have at least one that relates to them," Kisilewicz says. "That's amazing about the game and we really want to, in the end, make you think about yourself while playing the game. That's the goal."

Jan, obviously confused by what he's seen, runs back up to the comms room and demands an explanation. The voice on the other line doesn't give much in the way of satisfying answers, but it does aid in another way. The voice says, "Activate Branching Protocol," followed by "Create The Alters." Jan, devoid of other options, walks back down to the Quantum Computer and accesses those key decision points in his Mind Record. Searching for a Branching Point, Jan pinpoints one where he could see what if, instead of moving away, he stayed home and took care of his mother.

After a cutscene that shows that Jan has some seriously conflicted feelings about what he's doing, the result is ready in the womb. An Alter of Jan Dolski emerges. He appears slightly distinct in facial hair and hairstyle; plus he speaks differently. But make no mistake; this is Jan Dolski. However, this alternate path sent him down the road to becoming a technician. To denote the difference between your Jan and this new one in the menus, this new one is called Jan Technician. My Jan tries to catch Technician up on the situation, but Technician is clearly confused and irritated by what's going on.

As I try to explain things to him, I'm given dialogue options, with each one pulling different emotions from him: words like "Anxiety," "Insecurity," "Fun," "Less Gloom," "Frustration," and "Rebellion" pop up around his face each time I provide an answer. As you grow your roster of Alters, you're responsible for monitoring the mental states of your team. I can't help but feel there's no way to end this first chat with Technician on great terms, so while he helps me to fix the engine, he tells my Jan to stay away from him. My Jan lets Technician storm off. It's okay; the base is officially mobile again, and the Jans can escape the sunrise. For now.

Going MOBILE

The base begins rolling like a giant wheel. Now that we're moving in the opposite direction of the impending sunrise, I have some time to breathe and catch up on other tasks. I craft a repair kit to fix the comms room, making it so I can finally hear the person on the other line with minimal static and interference. Afterward, I return to the Quantum Computer and access Jan's Mind Record. Where I chose as the decision point to create Jan Technician, a new branch on the Mind Record timeline has split off. I can now see Technician's life choices and key decision moments that differ from my Jan's life. It's a fascinating exercise to learn how different lives can become based on one different decision.

The ultimate goal is to create a fully operational team of Jan Dolski Alters, each with their specialties, personalities, and looks, based on which decision point you engage with. For example, what if Jan intervened in the mugging he witnessed as a child? If I select that branching point to explore through an Alter, it will create a doctor Alter who allows characters to heal and cook faster. What if Jan took the job his deadbeat dad offered him instead of telling him to shove it? That would create a miner who enables the team to be more efficient at gathering resources on the surface. What if he decided to stay in college instead of dropping out? That gives you the scientist Alter, who can research new technologies.

Creating Alters seems as much about developing the correct team composition as it is about ensuring that the personalities don't clash too much. Since you can't create every Alter in a single playthrough and each Alter arrives with different pros and cons, you must be careful when creating new versions of Jan. However, you don't have much information before creating your Alters, so it's probably wise to just hope for the best and smooth things over after the fact. The Alters will hang out with each other, like exercising or having a beer, but they can sometimes get into conflicts and ask you to pick a side – though maybe the best course of action is to remain neutral. You'll need to be careful, as Alters can rebel against you and push you towards a failure state if they lose enough faith in you.

I legitimately can't wait to see how I can put my teams together and how the various personalities will interact with one another once I have a full team of Jans in the final game, particularly once I begin doling out work assignments to multiple Alters. For this demo, I need to make amends with Technician before I can hope to fill out my team even more. I engage in a conversation with him and make the right dialogue choices. Before I know it, my Jan is trying to make their mom's trademark pierogi recipe from their limited ingredients while reminiscing about their family. With that, Technician's mood and cooperation improve, and things are finally starting to look up.

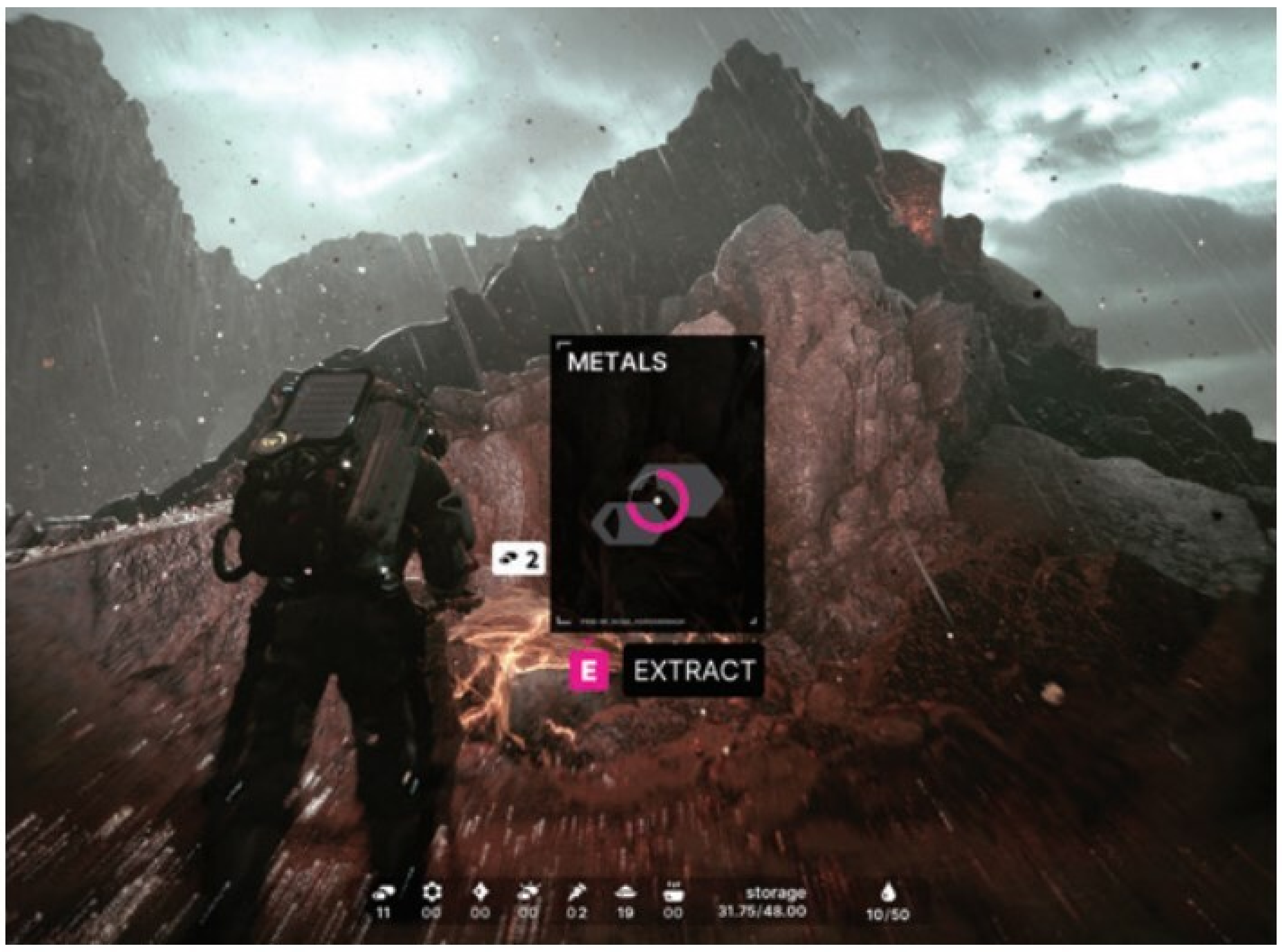
My time with The Alters is about to come to a close, so I run up to the comms room and see that I have a call from a new contact. I won't spoil it, but it is a person from Jan's past, which adds an extra fold to the story and where we're going with the what-if scenarios concerning Jan's history. However, shortly after I hang up, the base stops unexpectedly, and it's time to see what I need to do to get things rolling once again.

"You are running from the sun all the time; you have this huge mobile base, and whenever you finish an act – you managed to overcome some problem that was blocking you – you start rolling to the rendezvous point where you are supposed to meet the rescue team that is going to take you home," lead designer Rafał Włosek says. "It was very difficult for us to balance this in such a way so we could create pressure and create this feeling that you have to survive and make sure that the player will not stay too long in one place, because we want the story to progress, but at the same time, we didn't want to create a situation of too much tension where you cannot focus on your Alters and the [what-if] questions we want to talk about with you."

ROOM for EXPANSION

As the mobile base comes to a halt, the words "Act 1" flash across the screen with a message that the sunrise is now coming in 29 days. It seems like the game is ready to begin in earnest now. Everything to this point was an in-depth tutorial; just like Jan, I learned on the job.

After spending more than two hours on the mysterious planet on which Jan Dolski landed, I am itching to get back to the main task at hand of creating my team of Alters and steadily working towards escaping the scorching sun for good. Even though there's no combat, The Alters was thrilling from the moment I began my all-too-short play session. Now, in addition to those what-ifs keeping me awake at night, it's also excitement to experience the full version of The Alters later this year. 11 Bit Studios' immersive survival game with a multiversal twist has skyrocketed up my most anticipated list and I can't wait to see how Jan's story (as well as all the other Jans' stories) will play out. ■



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ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

Katanas and kunai

When your entire franchise revolves around sneaky assassins lurking in the shadows and running up buildings, it's no surprise fans of the series have been clamoring for a ninja-themed protagonist for years. Assassin's Creed Shadows is the answer to that oft-repeated request, but it's far more than that, thanks to the introduction of a second protagonist, Yasuke the samurai. He's a playable historical figure (a first for the series) and his approach varies wildly from the shinobi protagonist, Naoe. We got a first-hand look at this during a behind-closed-doors demo in Los Angeles.

It opens with Yasuke entering a town, drawing everyone's attention. As if his ornate armor wasn't enough to set him apart, Yasuke is a huge person, and people in the street stare as he walks by. The developers explain that social stealth just isn't an option for him, and he can't climb buildings the way Naoe or other assassins can. That said, he is far from powerless.

A woman pleads for Yasuke's help in dispatching a local group that heavily taxes the community, and he obliges without hesitation. Instead of giving a marker on the screen for where the player should go, a list of clues to the target's location appears, and Yasuke calmly walks to the appropriate district. As soon as he spots the corrupt Samurai nearby, a guard tells Yasuke to leave. Making no attempt to disguise his intentions, Yasuke draws his kanabō, a massive spiked club, and enters combat. His swings are brutal, decapitating one enemy and crushing another to death, each foe dying in just a few swings. Yasuke is so powerful, in fact, that our demo-player accidentally strikes a civilian with the wind-up to a more powerful attack. I make a mental note to pay attention to my surroundings when I do this mission.

After switching to his katana and killing the samurai boss in a one-on-one duel, the developers present us with a choice. The daimyo, an official this corrupt samurai reported to, needs to be assassinated as well, but it's up to the crowd watching the presentation to vote on which character we'd like to see. Satisfied with our viewing of Yasuke's abilities, we unanimously vote for Naoe.

Naoe enters the castle grounds at night, cloaked by darkness and a convenient rainfall. Her playstyle is a lot closer to what we've come to expect from the series, with parkour and stealth at her disposal. After using a grappling hook to swing from a tree branch, she immediately drops down to assassinate a guard, then goes prone to crawl through some nearby grass. It's nighttime, but the area is well-illuminated by some paper lanterns. Luckily, Naoe can use her kunai to put the flames out, distracting her target and making her approach that much easier. Throughout her run, many lanterns are extinguished – "Shadows" felt like a generic title on its first reveal, but after seeing how much the player interacts with sources of light, it's quite fitting.

When Naoe finally reaches the daimyo, she loops around to a shallow pool he stands beside. Dropping to her stomach, she submerges herself in the water, using it as cover. After waiting a few moments, we see her pull out a reed to use as a makeshift snorkel before continuing. The daimyo never sees her coming, and he's dead in a single thrust of her blade.

The demo concludes with one more run through the castle with each character, showing Yasuke's straightforward approach and a daytime route for Naoe. There are new weapons (Yasuke has a rifle, Naoe has a chain weapon called a kusarigama), flashy weapon abilities, and plenty of assassinations, all of which do a great job at emphasizing just how different these two characters are. I'm excited to try them each out for myself when the game launches later this year. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft **RELEASE** November 12

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE

The past is prologue

The summer of 1995 is the last one Swann will spend living in the small town of Velvet Cove. A habitual loner, the introverted teenager had been content with enjoying herself and having few attachments keeping her tied to the town. Naturally, it would be this fateful summer that Swann meets three new friends and, to her surprise, forms a strong bond with them. How can she leave now? She may not have a choice, as the four stumble upon a supernatural event so impactful that they agree to go their separate ways and never speak of it – or to each other – ever again.

Fast-forward 27 years to 2022, when players begin this new choice-driven adventure by the creators of Life is Strange and Tell Me Why. Lost Records: Bloom & Rage begins with a now 43-year-old Swann returning to Velvet Cove, where she reunites with her three teenagehood friends: Nora, Autumn, and Kat. Why have they chosen to meet now after over two decades of silence? What happened in 1995 to force them to split up in the first place? These are the mysteries players will unravel.

Like Life is Strange, Lost Records tasks players to make decisions that will shape the narrative. The difference is that the story unfolds in 2022 and 1995, and choices in the present affect scenes in the past and vice versa (roughly 70% of the game takes place in '95). An early example Don't Nod shares is a scene where adult Swann visits a bar, and dialogue options present one line about how she used to drink a lot when she was younger and another stating she never drank back then. Whichever you decide will be reflected in the younger Swann, who will either be a teenage drinker or not.

Shaping the events through dialogue is intriguing, but creative director Michel Koch says the bulk of decision-making revolves around your relationship with your friends. Each girl has a wildly different personality. Autumn is the leader, personable and thoughtful. Nora is a rebellious, loud-mouthed goth girl. Kat is fierce and opinionated despite being the smallest. Swann isn't a blank slate either, with Koch describing her as quirky and witty despite her aloofness. Your friendship with each one will be tested, as agreeing with one may put you at odds with another.

"Something that we are pushing more is really the relationships because the main focus of the game is about being part of a group of friends," says Koch. "So how you are navigating your friendships with the three other girls is really at the center of the choice mechanism in this game."

Life is Strange protagonists usually have a unique, often fantastical, gameplay mechanic. Teenage Swann can use her camcorder to film videos of herself, the world, and the people around her. Koch wouldn't share how this mechanic ties into the story but talks it up as being important.

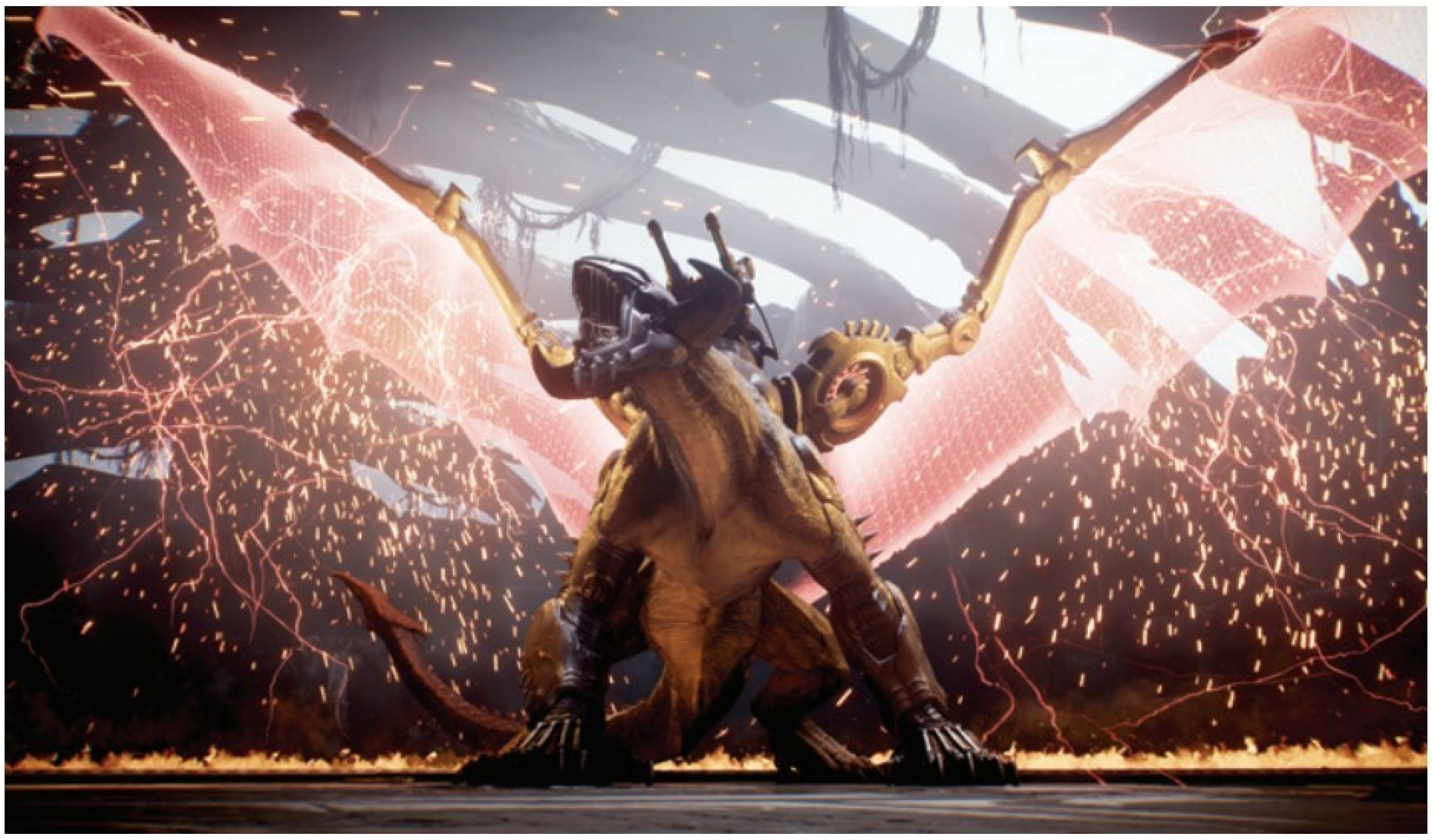
The few trailers we've seen have an unsettling vibe, and when you add the story's significant time skip a la Stephen King's *It* (which Koch admits is a direct influence), Lost Records feels suspiciously like a horror game. Koch states that while he loves the horror genre and the game definitely has darker, scarier elements, he doesn't consider it a full horror game. "But there is magic in this game for sure," he says.

Lost Records: Bloom & Rage will be released in two parts, the first of which arrives late this year. Koch says the second half will arrive shortly after but wouldn't state a window. He hopes the game resonates with players as Don't Nod envisions this as the first story in a new franchise. As a fan of Don't Nod, I'm hoping the mystery surrounding Swann and her friends grabs me and has me more eager to talk about it than they are. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Don't Nod **DEVELOPER** Don't Nod
RELEASE 2024

DOOM: THE DARK AGES

The origin of fear



2020's Doom Eternal and its two expansions saw the Doom Slayer bring an emphatic end to Hell's invasion of Earth. It's unclear when or if he'll be awakened to defend humankind again, but until then, it's time to learn how he became so feared – and so angry – in the first place. Enter Doom: The Dark Ages, a prequel to the 2016 series reboot that transports players to a Hell-infested middle ages.

Doom: The Dark Ages' debut trailer sets the stage with the line, "Before he became a hero, he was the super weapon of gods and kings." We'll have to wait to learn what that means, as developer id Software has divulged next to nothing about the game's plot other than its premise. The trailer shows off a medieval castle razed by Hell's decidedly more advanced forces. The Doom Slayer, now rocking a fur cape and loincloth over his signature (though now spiked) armor, descends from the heavens to begin a campaign of demonic extermination.

Doom Slayer still rocks his signature Super Shotgun, but his most noteworthy new weapon is the Shield Saw, a shield with retractable blades to make it a motor-powered buzzsaw (which he activates by pulling a chain). In addition to providing a new layer of defense, he can do his bloodiest Captain America impression by performing powerful shield bashes that send mobs flying backward and lobbing the shield at distant targets, which also eviscerates foes on the return trip. If that's not enough, the trailer shows him executing a timed parry block that stuns the attacker, leaving it vulnerable to a shotgun blast.

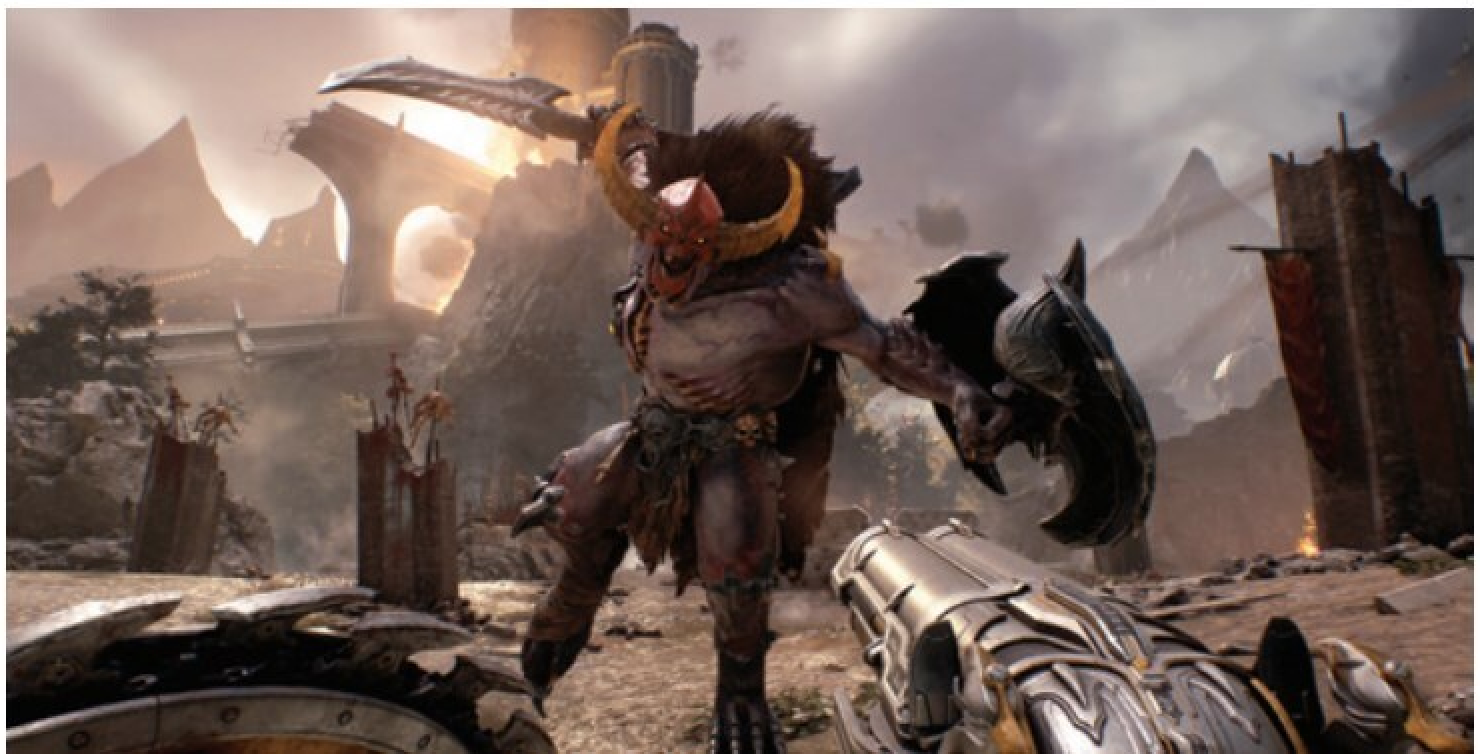
Another medieval addition is a wrist-mounted flail for a ranged melee attack. One cool weapon loads a skull, grinds it up, and then fires the bone fragments in a machinegun-like spread. If that's not medieval enough, the trailer shows the Doom Slayer soaring through the skies on the back of a gun-mounted, fire-breathing dragon-like demon. He also goes full *Pacific Rim* by hopping into the cockpit of a giant mech suit that he uses to trade blows with a demonic behemoth in a kaiju-style showdown.

As a huge fan of Doom's 2016 comeback who was less enthused with Doom Eternal, I'm hoping Doom: The Dark Ages leans harder into the more freeform combat design of the former. Eternal's more strict, strategic approach to battles didn't hit quite the same way, so I'd like a return to the freedom to annihilate monsters as I see fit.

Given that he retains an arsenal of modern weaponry, it appears the Doom Slayer was somehow transported to this antiquated world from the future. If not time travel, perhaps he's been brought to a different world entirely that resembles Earth's Middle Ages. The best thing about this series is that its lore is so ridiculous that either explanation would be perfectly plausible and absurd – at least, I hope so. Doom (2016) had an understated hilarity thanks to Doom Slayer's amusingly brutish reactions to everything around him, something Eternal emphasized less. That The Dark Ages' succinct Steam description reads in all caps, "YOU ARE THE SUPER WEAPON IN A MEDIEVAL WAR AGAINST HELL," is delightfully silly and bodes well for how id Software is approaching the game's tone.

Despite being a Microsoft-owned property, Doom: The Dark Ages is also launching day and date on PlayStation 5. This decision continues Xbox's recent multiplatform trend, which is good news for Doom fans on PlayStation who might have been fearful they would miss out on the next installment. Regardless of what platform I play it on, I can't wait to go medieval on some cacodemons next year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Bethesda
DEVELOPER id Software **RELEASE** 2025



ASTRO BOT

The finally-ready-for-prime-time player

A version of Astro Bot made its first appearance in 2013 alongside the release of the PlayStation 4. The adorable little robot was part of The Playroom and was an unassuming element of what was meant to be bundled software that showed off the unique capabilities of the PlayStation 4. It wasn't really a video game in the traditional sense – more a neat tech showcase. There was something undeniably appealing, however, about the tiny little robot mascot Sony and Team Asobi created, which led to 2018's PlayStation VR-exclusive, Astro Bot Rescue Mission.

That game was a platforming revelation bursting with charm and an infectious soundtrack from Kenneth CM Young. It may not have been the software that finally convinced everyone to adopt VR as a platform, but those who did play it recognized work from an impressive team that could go toe-to-toe with Nintendo's best platformers.

Sony recognized this, too, and smartly put Team Asobi to work on Astro's Playroom, a game included with every PlayStation 5 for free that convinced anyone who played it that their big new video game console purchase was absolutely worth it.

All of that is a long explanation for why we are so excited about Astro Bot. It won't be Astro's first gigantic platforming adventure (that title belongs to Rescue Mission), but Astro's Playroom was simply not enough, and we can't wait to take the little PlayStation robot on another huge adventure.

Sony has shared that the game will include six galaxies with more than 80 levels, and Astro has all kinds of new abilities. Footage for the game shows him flying both a PlayStation 5 controller and a console, turning into a sponge to absorb and dispense water, and donning all kinds of PlaySation-themed outfits and skills, like using Kratos from God of War's axe. Astro is also seen carrying dogs and penguins on his back, freezing time, and wearing frog gloves that let him fight enemies and grab onto platforms in the distance.

If we were to offer any potential complaints – and they are admittedly minor – it seems like there is content pulled from Rescue Mission. Many of the bosses we saw in the Astro Bot footage are bosses we fought in the VR game (though they do have new attacks), and the theme song for the trailer is a remixed version of a song from Rescue Mission. That being said, to this day, Rescue Mission exists exclusively on PlayStation VR (and PlayStation 4). Many have not played that game, and today, there is no easy way to play it. You cannot play the game on a PlayStation 5 via PlayStation VR2, which is a shame.

Astro Bot is PlayStation's secret weapon, and its developer, Team Asobi, is quietly one of Sony's most creative developers. No one outside of Nintendo makes games that understand the platform they exist on with such expertise. Astro Bot will undoubtedly be the robot's big chance to show everyone (not just VR adopters) that he can deliver an impressive, full-length adventure. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER PlayStation Studios **DEVELOPER** Team Asobi **RELEASE** September 6

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 6

New moves in the tried-and-true formula

Each time a new Call of Duty is revealed, the developers talk about how "this is the most ambitious Call of Duty yet" or it provides the "most intense gunfights ever" or some other soaring platitude that checks all the marketing boxes. This year is no different, as during a recent visit to Treyarch, members of the studio, as well as those from support developer Raven Software and publisher Activision, spent hours singing the praises of the latest entry in the long-running, mega-popular shooting franchise. However, they also brought receipts, demonstrating that while, yes, the marketing speak may be going through the same motions as every year, the developers creating the content are truly pushing the game forward in exciting ways.

Call of Duty: Black Ops 6 completely changes how players move through the environment thanks to a new Omnimovement system. With this new mechanic, you can sprint, slide, and dive in all directions, not just forward. On top of that, you can activate new Intelligent Movement options inspired by games like Forza that let you sprint, mantle, crouch, and slide automatically for the most fluid motion possible.

Black Ops 6's campaign serves as a true successor to the espionage action of 2020's Black Ops Cold War. Black Ops 6 takes us to 1991, a full decade after the events of Black Ops Cold War and just two years after the story of 2012's Black Ops 2. The Soviet Union is no more, and global attention has turned to the Gulf War in Iraq. However, it wouldn't be Black Ops without some sense of intrigue and conspiracy. An entity known as The Pantheon has infiltrated the highest levels of government, including the CIA, and the Black Ops agents must go rogue to prevent the group from unleashing an apocalyptic series of events.

Going rogue means they can only trust themselves, and they can't just call on the might of the US military to bail them out. And they must maintain a healthy sense of paranoia – they truly cannot trust anyone. Black Ops 6 leans heavily into the spy-action thriller side of Call of Duty campaigns, featuring global locations, innovative gadgets, and several twists the developers hope you won't see coming. The developers also use historical touchpoints throughout; one mission I watched takes place during a fundraising dinner for Bill Clinton's presidential campaign, with a climactic motorcycle chase through the city streets.

As players trot across the globe, they can expect missions like traditional Gulf War operations, a casino heist, spycraft missions, operations that offer player agency, and what the developers simply call, "mindf---ery." And you'll do so alongside a cast of characters featuring new agents and familiar faces like Woods and Adler.

On the multiplayer front, players can expect 12 all-new weapons to the franchise, several additional gadgets, a customizable HUD, 12 traditional three-lane maps, 4 smaller Strike maps, and a deep Prestige system that expands on the popular classic model longtime players love. And if you're a fan of Zombies, don't worry: Treyarch hasn't forgotten about you, as it's bringing back round-based Zombies and a story that picks up right where the last campaign left off.

After sitting through various presentations on the entirety of the Black Ops 6 package and playing an hour of multiplayer, I don't know if this is the greatest Call of Duty game yet or whatever the parade of praise thrown my way tried to communicate. What I do know, however, is that I haven't felt as compelled to play a new Call of Duty since I sat in a dark room at E3 2019 and watched an impressive demo of Modern Warfare.

If the footage I saw of Call of Duty: Black Ops 6 is any indication, the campaign packs a punch, and the multiplayer suite is taking impressive strides to not only deliver fan-favorite features, but also push the franchise forward in exciting ways. And I can't wait to see how all these various moving parts coalesce into the latest entry in one of the industry's biggest franchises. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter (12-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Activision **DEVELOPER** Treyarch, Raven Software **RELEASE** October 25

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

A new world of fantasy

Whenever a legendary trio of game creators known for a single franchise embark on a new IP together, it rightfully captures a lot of attention. That's exactly what director Katsura Hashino, art director Shigenori Soejima, and composer Shoji Meguro, the trio best known for the beloved Persona series, is doing with Metaphor: ReFantazio. Though it derives inspiration from many of Persona's most prominent elements, Metaphor is a wholly new experience disconnected from the Persona franchise.

Taking place in the fantasy kingdom of Euchronia, Metaphor tells the tale of a world riddled with prejudice. The main protagonist is of the Elda tribe, and during the earliest stages of my demo, his fairy companion, Gallica, expresses shock at how out in the open the prejudice against him was. The two then talk of a fabled world where true equality exists and fantasize about such a society. One of the things people love about Persona is its willingness to tackle challenging topics other games might veer away from, and Metaphor seems to carry that same quality into its narrative.

Combat feels like the next evolution of the turn-based system seen in the Persona games. Most encounters begin with a strike on the enemies in the field before entering the game's primary turn-based combat mechanics. If you stealthily strike the enemies, you can land multiple hits on them, knocking their health down considerably; you can even kill weaker monsters without entering the turn-based battle.

Metaphor also incorporates a line-based formation system where you can choose which of your party is in the frontline and who hangs back. Those in the back take less damage, but their melee attacks are weaker, while those in the front often receive the brunt of the attack but can also land their own attacks at full strength. During my time with this system, I found the best results came from putting magic wielders and healers in the back, and the more physical warriors up front.

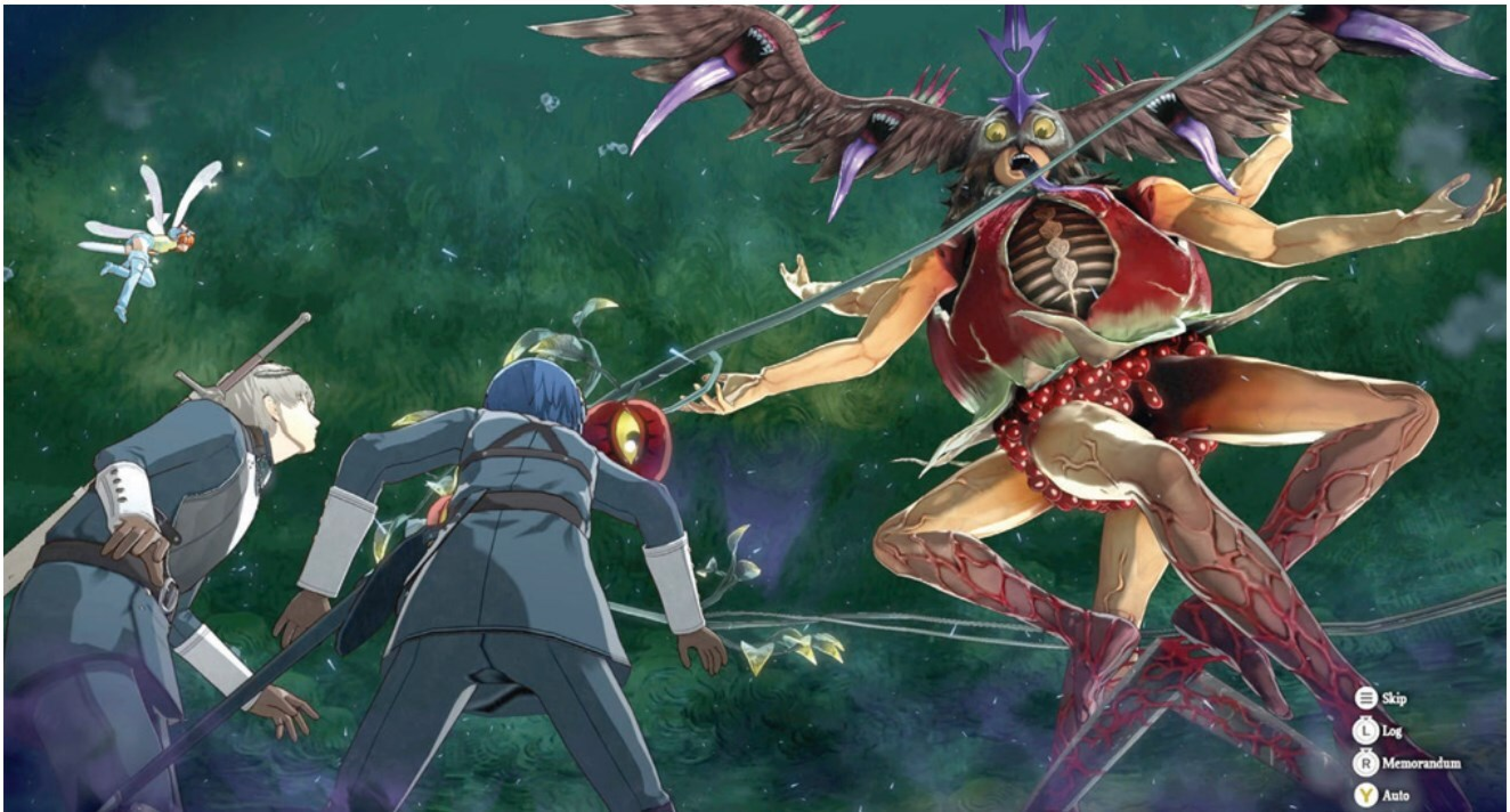
In battle, characters can also summon Persona-like creatures called Archetypes. These powerful entities leverage magic based on traditional fantasy tropes like Knight, Warrior, and Seeker. While they're strong on their own, Archetypes can also perform team-up attacks called Synthesis. These moves allow one character to lend their strength to another to perform more powerful and effective attacks. During a boss battle I played, I used Synthesis attacks to significant effect, with some applying different elemental effects and others spreading out the damage to all enemies instead of just one.

Speaking of elements carried over from Persona, Metaphor uses a similar UI as Persona 5 Royal, giving it an unmistakable style. Flashy menus and gorgeous art accentuate the trademark Soejima style, while the music by Meguro replaces his hip-hop and jazzy rock-inspired soundtrack from the Persona franchise with tracks that feel more inspired by war chants.

Though I've always appreciated Persona's real-world setting, Metaphor's fantasy kingdom, narrative threads, and appropriately grotesque beasts pulled me in and made me enthusiastic to experience the next evolution of this team's work. I'm excited to get my hands on the final version when it launches this October.

BY BRIAN SHEA

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Studio Zero
RELEASE October 11



BLACK MYTH: WUKONG

A classic tale retold

Black Myth: Wukong is an action role-playing game that closely follows the events of Wu Cheng'en's seminal novel *Journey to the West.* The work, based on Chinese mythology and Buddhist folklore, follows a monk who meets a spirit called Sun Wukong, often called Monkey King, during his search for sacred religious texts. While its central narrative is still unknown, Game Science's upcoming Soulslike depicts Wukong's encounters with Yaoguai, various creatures and demons in Chinese myth, set within stunning Eastern landscapes.

My hands-on demo begins at the base of Black Wind Mountain's summit, in a place called the Forest of Wolves, populated with rich greenery, alpine trees, and all manner of wind-weathered stones and shrines. The path to the top is guarded by scattered groups of foxes and wolf-like humanoids who wield axes, shields, and bows. While these enemies aren't challenging, they serve as great punching bags to learn combat fundamentals like dodging, charged-up staff techniques, and early spells like Immobilize, which freezes enemies in place for a burst-attack opportunity.

Wukong's primary weapon is a bō staff, referred to as Ruyi Jingu Bang in the inspirational literature, which he can shrink down to the size of a needle for safe-keeping inside his ear. The Monkey King commands an arsenal of weapon combos, including the ability to charge up Jingu Bang to pool together Focus Points, which allow him to unleash flashy heavy strikes. While you can't store the Focus Points you acquire by charging his weapon – Wukong automatically attacks as you release the button – you can store up focus points to use later in the fight by landing enough light attacks on an enemy. Learning the timing of these weapon flourishes and how to use them alongside your growing library of mystic spells is critical to success against large opponents like the game's many bosses.

While there are at least half a dozen optional and required bosses in the Forest of Wolves, I spend my time challenging two of its more difficult adversaries. The first is a flame-spear-wielding wolf named Guangzhi, who rushes me down and overwhelms me with flame-bending sweeps and dashes. After beating him on my fourth attempt, which I manage to do by relying on my immobilization spell's cooldown, Guangzhi drops his double-tipped spear, called Red Tides, which slots into one of Wukong's empty spell slots rather than replacing his magical staff. Upon activating the ability, Wukong momentarily transforms into the wolf I just defeated, allowing me to wield the boss' fiery powers to inflict Scorch Bane, a status effect that sets enemies on fire and deals damage over time. Notably, Wukong's health pool is separate from the Yaoguai he embodies, making this new ability a great tactic to use when low on health against Black Wind Mountain's ravenous bosses.

I run past another optional boss – a gargantuan humanoid with a disproportionate golden head – and maneuver a bamboo-laden mountain ridge, finally making it to my destination: the Guanyin Temple, which is home to Lingxuzi, a building-sized canine appointed by a mysterious character known as the Black Wind King. The towering white wolf jumps in the air, scaling the entirety of the arena in a few seconds, and gets a taste of my blood after a swift strike. While Lingxuzi licks his lips, I freeze him in place and begin a flurry of light attacks and focused heavy strikes. Of course, this is a Soulslike, so I end up dying multiple times, slowly memorizing the Yaoguai's movements and tactics over the course of roughly five attempts. When I finally triumph, I equip a rare wolf mask I loot from Lingxuzi's corpse. It grants me a damage buff against critically wounded enemies.

Black Myth: Wukong seems to present a compelling world of striking character designs, boss fights requiring skill mastery, and gorgeous environments. I'm eagerly awaiting the game's release, not simply for its excellent combat and promising character building, but to learn its take on the prominent Chinese folk tale.

BY ALEX VAN AKEN

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Game Science
DEVELOPER Game Science **RELEASE** August 20 (PS5, PC), TBA (Xbox Series X/S)

FROSTPUNK 2

Breaking the ice

The 2018 release of Frostpunk delivered a unique twist on the city-builder genre, putting you in control of a band of humans trying to survive the new ice age. Players assumed the role of The Captain as they built up their small colony of workers to a flourishing city in the post-apocalypse. Along the way, players needed to make hard decisions, like enforcing authoritarian laws, putting children to work, or worse. Frostpunk 2 expands on the offerings in the original game and looks to improve on nearly every aspect of the well-liked simulation.

After three decades of roaming the frozen desert, the group faces the prospect of another whiteout. They return to the old dreadnought in hopes of using its heat to survive, but they must first reignite the furnace. After using the frostbreak ability and constructing extraction districts, I retrieve enough oil to light the furnace. With that major hurdle out of the way, it's time to look at my group's other needs: food, shelter, goods, and materials. I start with food and a storehouse to begin my stockpile.

Unfortunately, 6 of my 1,350 people come down with an illness and are unable to work. Illnesses rise and fall based on factors like food supply, heat, and shelter availability. Speaking of shelter, I construct housing districts near the furnace to provide some heat to the residences. Thoughtful planning of your city is crucial to survival, as is the intentional delegation and prioritization of necessary work.

As the weeks roll on, citizens start expressing concerns about the amount of food production we're seeing in the lead-up to the storm. A 42-year-old gardener speaks up, suggesting we implement emergency shifts or food ration restrictions. After careful consideration, I don't think we need to take too drastic of measures just yet. Another person – a 62-year-old seamstress – tells me that the senior citizens volunteer to walk out into the frozen tundra and sacrifice themselves to allow the younger generation to survive the whiteout. Okay, maybe things are getting dire.

I immediately implement both emergency shifts and food restrictions to increase the stockpile efforts. I also create extra food districts and storehouses. It's going to come down to the wire. This tension is when Frostpunk 2 shines. The game is constantly throwing variables at you, but they don't feel unfair. In my case, I spent too much time worrying about food and neglected excavating building materials from the ice, so I fell behind on my other construction projects, and the lack of sufficient shelter led to disease running rampant, significantly hindering my workforce.

Then it comes: a decision point. The group is collectively expressing concern we won't have enough food to survive, so they present two options: let the seniors sacrifice themselves, reducing the number of mouths to feed, or slaughter a nearby seal colony. These types of awful decisions permeate every angle of Frostpunk 2. I opt to choose neither and continue down the same path, just crossing my fingers I'm doing the right thing. That might as well be the mantra of Frostpunk 2: make your best judgment call and hope you're doing the right thing.

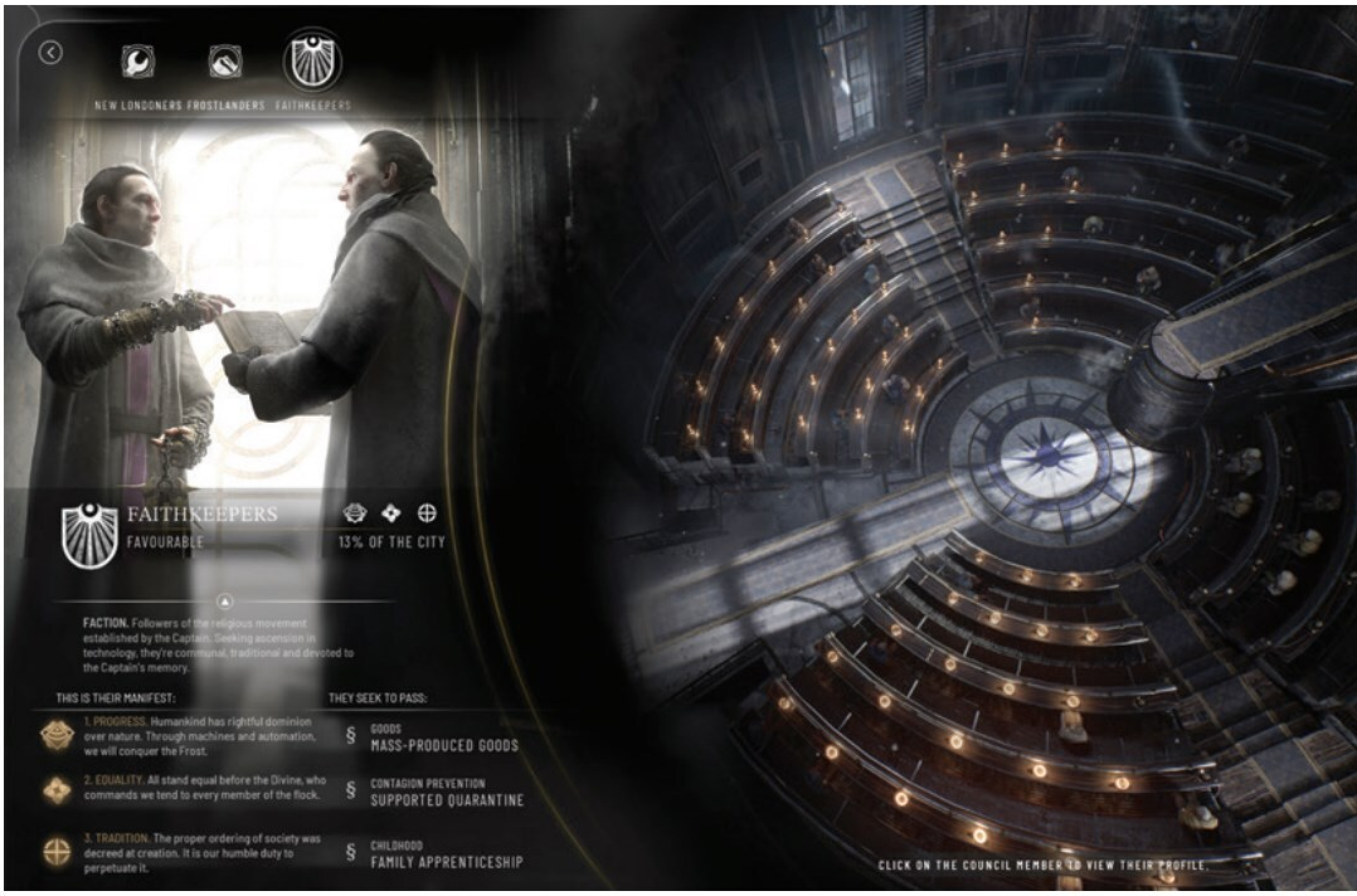
With less than a week to go, we hit our food goal, but at what cost? Trust has dropped dramatically, and disease is running rampant following months of emergency shifts. That tense stretch was nothing more than the tutorial, but it appropriately captures the essence of Frostpunk 2.

I'm then taken to the game's primary setting, New London. The old Captain is dead, and the city is weak. Overpopulation has run rampant, food is low, and coal is running out. You step into the role of the Steward in charge of leading New London back to prosperity. In New London, three factions have emerged, each with their own agendas, desires, and projects. The membership numbers of these groups will fluctuate, and you must balance your allegiances to them, playing the game of politics as you work to improve day-to-day life.

It's not just about building a city and allocating workers: Frostpunk 2 requires you to secure enough votes to not only stay in power but also pass laws that you propose using the game's intricate system. For instance, at one moment, I'm low on money, so I propose an economics law where the citizens must volunteer their free time unless they purchase an exemption, which raises funds for the city, allowing me to fund more projects. It's not the most popular option, but I secured enough support to push it through. If your projections look less confident ahead of the vote, you can try to negotiate with the various groups in New London to appease them so they will vote for your proposal.

City-builders can be extremely hit or miss for me, but when they hit, they hit hard. With so many systems stacked on top of each other, including what appears to be an incredible laws system, Frostpunk 2 not only has me circling July 25 on my calendar, but it has me eagerly re-downloading the original Frostpunk to satisfy the small taste my hands-on session provided me. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER 11 Bit Studios
DEVELOPER 11 Bit Studios
RELEASE July 25 (PC), TBD (Consoles)



FACTION. Followers of the religious movement established by the Captain. Seeking ascension in technology, they're communal, traditional and devoted to the Captain's memory.

1. PROGRESS. Humankind has rightful dominion over nature. Through machines and automation, we will conquer the Frost.

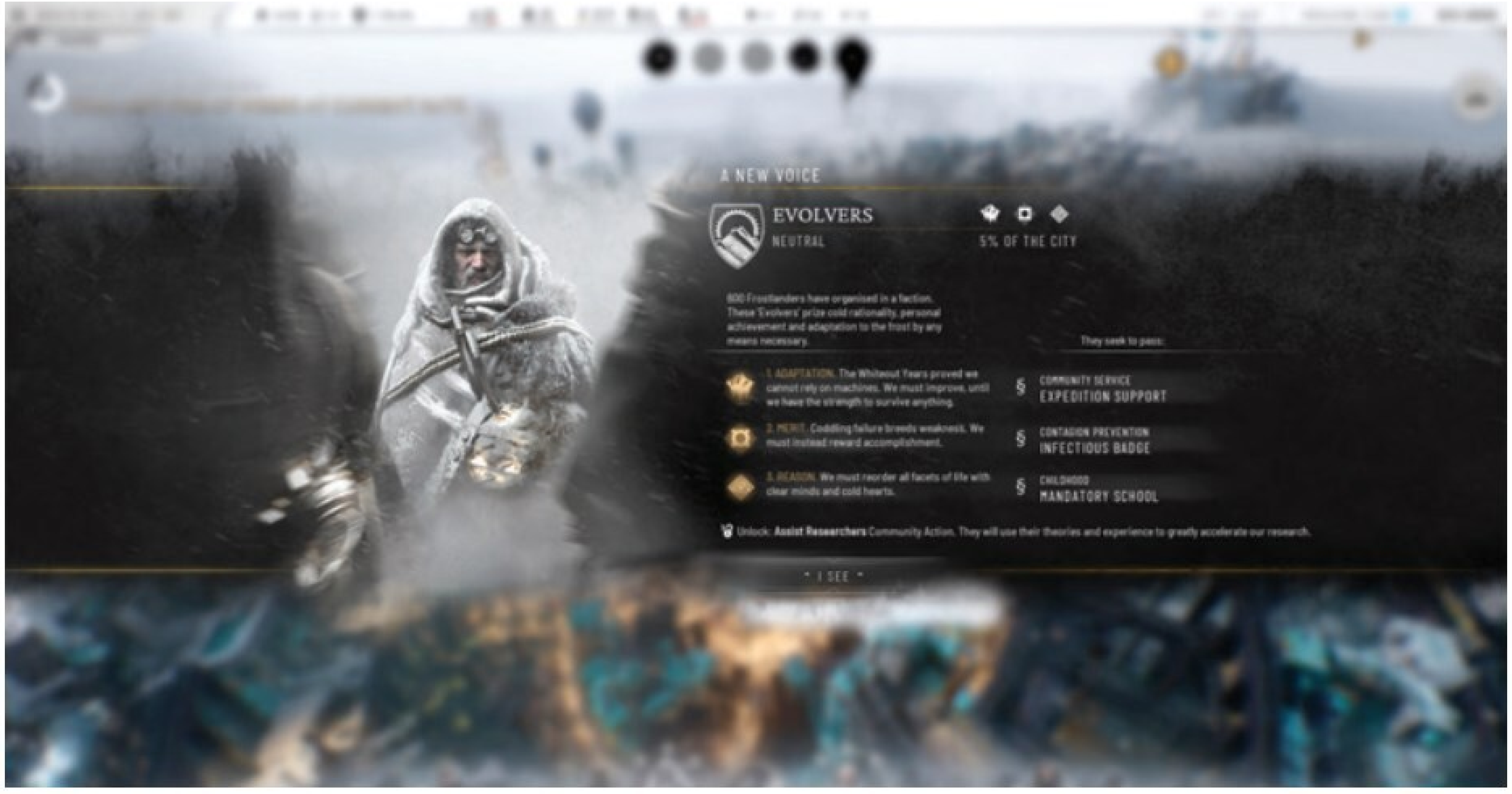
2. EQUALITY. All stand equal before the Divine, who commands we tend to every member of the flock.

3. TRADITION. The proper ordering of society was decreed at creation. It is our humble duty to perpetuate it.

§ GOODS: MASS-PRODUCED GOODS

§ CONTAGION PREVENTION: SUPPORTED QUARANTINE

§ CHILDHOOD: FAMILY APPRENTICESHIP



600 Frostlanders have organised in a faction. These 'Evolvers' prize cold rationality, personal achievement and adaptation to the frost by any means necessary.

1. ADAPTATION. The Whiteout Years proved we cannot rely on machines. We must improve, until we have the strength to survive anything.

2. MERIT. Coddling failure breeds weakness. We must instead reward accomplishment.

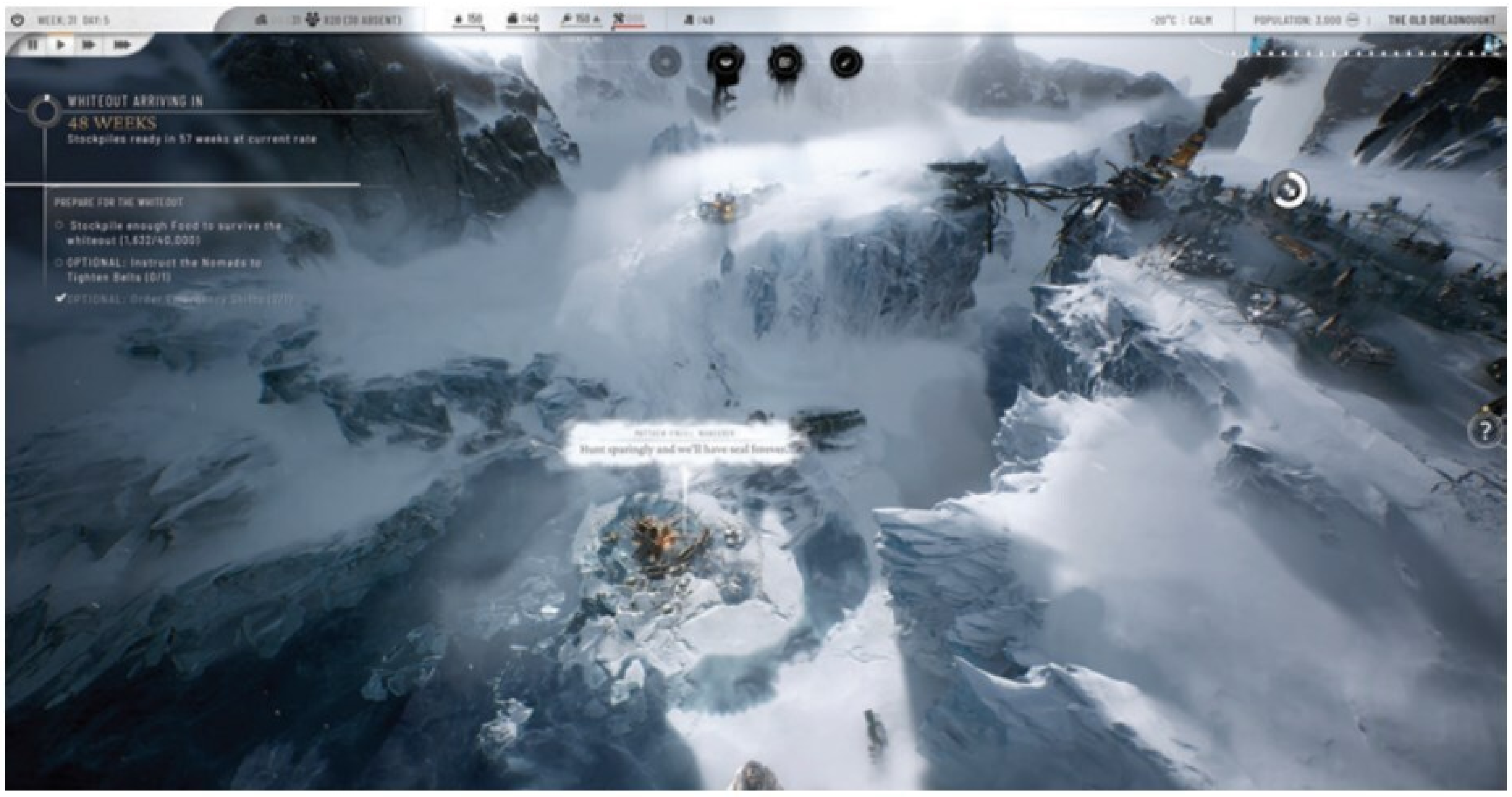
3. REASON. We must reorder all facets of life with clear minds and cold hearts.

§ COMMUNITY SERVICE: EXPEDITION SUPPORT

§ CONTAGION PREVENTION: INFECTIOUS BADGE

§ CHILDHOOD: MANDATORY SCHOOL

Unlock: **Assist Researchers** Community Action. They will use their theories and experience to greatly accelerate our research.



Stockpiles ready in 57 weeks at current rate

PREPARE FOR THE WHITEOUT

○ Stockpile enough Food to survive the whiteout (1,622/40,000)

○ OPTIONAL: Instruct the Nomads to Tighten Belts (0/1)

✓ OPTIONAL: Order Emergency Shifts (1/1)

Hunt sparingly and we'll have seal forever.

FUNKO FUSION

Get your head in the game

If you're a fan of a popular movie or TV show from any time in the last several decades, chances are, they've made a Funko Pop figurine of the main characters. The brand is ubiquitous in pop culture, so it was only a matter of time before it got a big video game adaptation. This sort of game could easily be a cheap cash grab, but after watching a preview demo and hearing from one of the head developers, I'm confident that Funko Fusion is much more than that.

You've never played a game by developer 10:10 Games, but you probably know the work of its staff – the founders of the studio are some of the former architects of the Lego games developed by Traveller's Tales, including CEO Jon Burton, COO Paul Flanagan, and design director Arthur Parsons, who leads the demo. He boots up a level based on John Carpenter's 1982 horror classic *The Thing*, which signifies one of the main elements that separates this title from the kid-friendly Lego titles; this game is rated T for Teen and references loads of media properties that are decidedly not for children. Still, the world is charming and lighthearted, so when a Funko Pop is impaled through the side of the head, it's more goofy than ghastly.

Parsons, playing as Kurt Russel's MacReady, fights off some Norwegians using the game's third-person shooting mechanics. According to Parsons, all characters have melee and ranged options, though they had to get creative for some characters. While He-Man uses his signature sword, OJ (the protagonist from Jordan Peele's *Nope*) swings around a miniature version of one of the inflatable tube men from his movie. Parsons dispatches enemies easily, which I imagine is due to the game's relatively low difficulty, his experience working on it as a developer, and the fact that every enemy has an outrageously large head, ideal for headshots.

Funko Fusion will ultimately feature over 20 IPs in the game. These are mostly NBCUniversal properties, like *Jurassic World*, *The Mummy*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Back to the Future*, but 10:10 has also made licensing deals with other properties, like Invincible and Five Nights At Freddy's.

Each IP includes playable characters, and many include levels, though the scope of each area will vary by the franchise. Some, like *The Thing*, get a proper, full-sized level, while others exist as secret cameo levels players can unlock in other worlds. Poking around the frozen outpost in the demo, Parsons travels through a portal to reach a world based on *Shaun of the Dead*, where he must escort a car of civilians to the safety of the Winchester. While there, he transforms into He-Man and shows off the zombie enemies, which turn the hero into a zombified version of himself. Even though it's just a cameo level, it's much larger than I initially expected, likely packing plenty of easter eggs in for fans of the movie.

Players can move through these levels in whatever order they want to progress through the game's main story. Parsons explains that this modular approach allows them to continue to support the game after launch by easily adding new characters and levels into the mix. The first instance of this is with the game's pre-order bonus, which includes Rick Grimes and Michonne from *The Walking Dead*, complete with alternate outfits.

It's been years since the last Lego game, and with this team of developers, I'm excited to watch them attempt to fill that gap. Luckily, I won't have to wait long. You can unbox Funko Fusion later this year, on September 13.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER 10:10 Games **DEVELOPER** 10:10 Games **RELEASE** September 13

GOODNIGHT UNIVERSE

Playing mind games

The lucky players who took a chance on 2021's Before Your Eyes were rewarded with a well-written, highly emotional narrative adventure with a unique mechanical twist. The game could be played entirely by blinking, utilizing players' webcams to capture their optical input. In the years since its release, some of Before Your Eyes' key designers have branched off to form a new studio, Nice Dreams. Its debut game, Goodnight Universe, expands upon the face-tracking premise and presents it in a new perspective, putting players in the diapers of a six-month-old infant.

This isn't just any baby, though. He's born with psychic powers and a heightened intelligence and awareness of his abilities and the world around him. This first-person adventure stars Isaac, the latest addition to a family that, though loving, has become emotionally detached from each other. The family is unaware of Isaac's powers, and despite his powerful mind, he's still limited by his infantile inability to communicate verbally. However, the family's troubles cause him to realize that he must keep his powers a secret.

"[Isaac] then realizes that it's very important to his mother especially that he be a normal baby because he was born prematurely and they had all these health scares when he was first born," says writer and creative director Graham Parkes. "And so he kind of takes the lesson that he needs to keep his powers and his differences secret from his family. And his decision to hide himself is sort of mirrored in what he's learning about each of the family members and the ways that they're hiding themselves from each other."

To this end, Issac becomes a secret helper by observing his family's issues and using his powers to ease their burdens. His abilities include moving objects with telekinesis and using telepathy to read family members' minds to gain insights into their thoughts and feelings. Nice Dream states that additional abilities will become available as the game progresses but doesn't specify them.

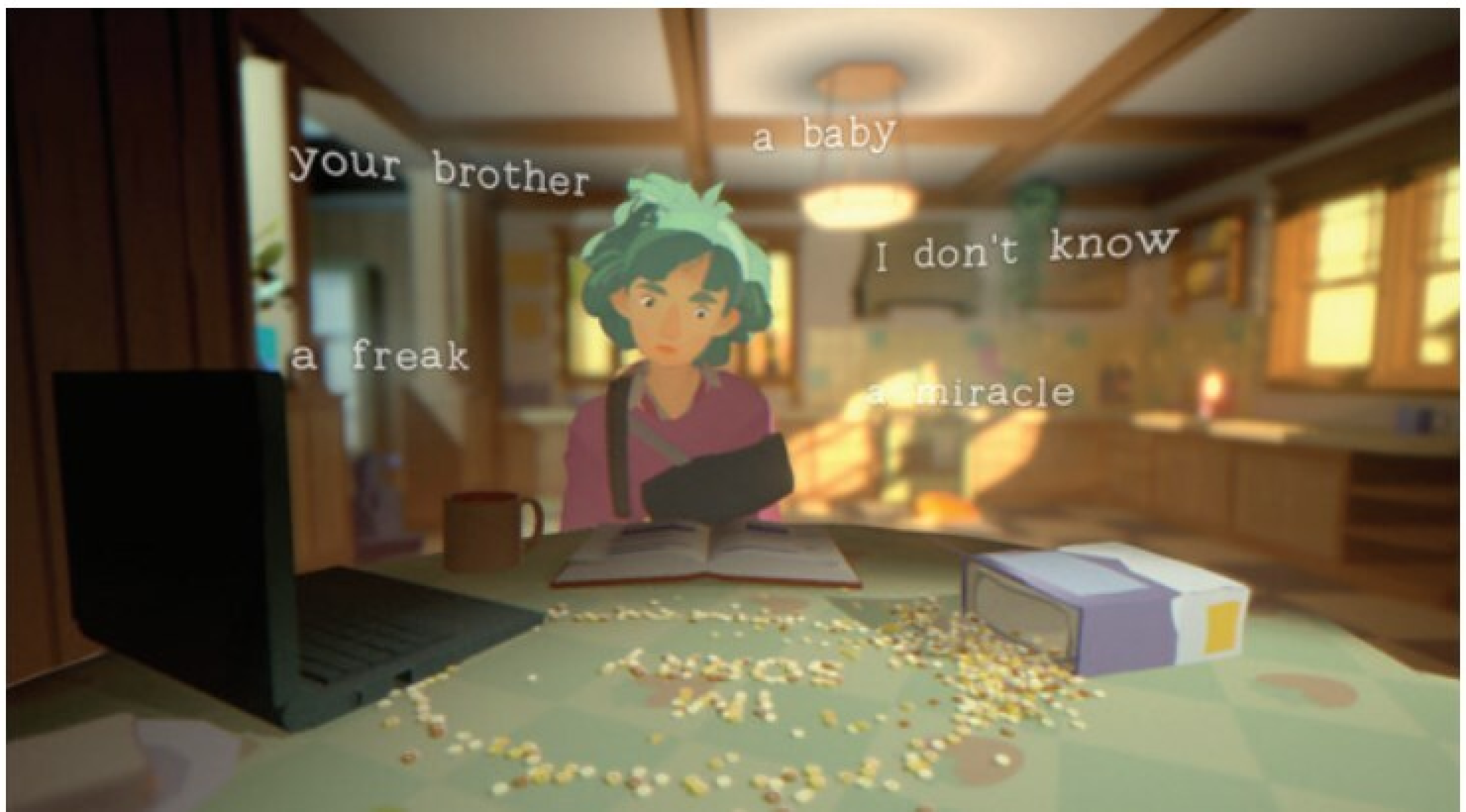
An expanded version of Before Your Eyes' blinking tech will allow a broader range of facial inputs to activate your powers. The team is still conceptualizing how this feature will work exactly, but it is exploring using mouth shapes, such as smiling and frowning, and other gestures.

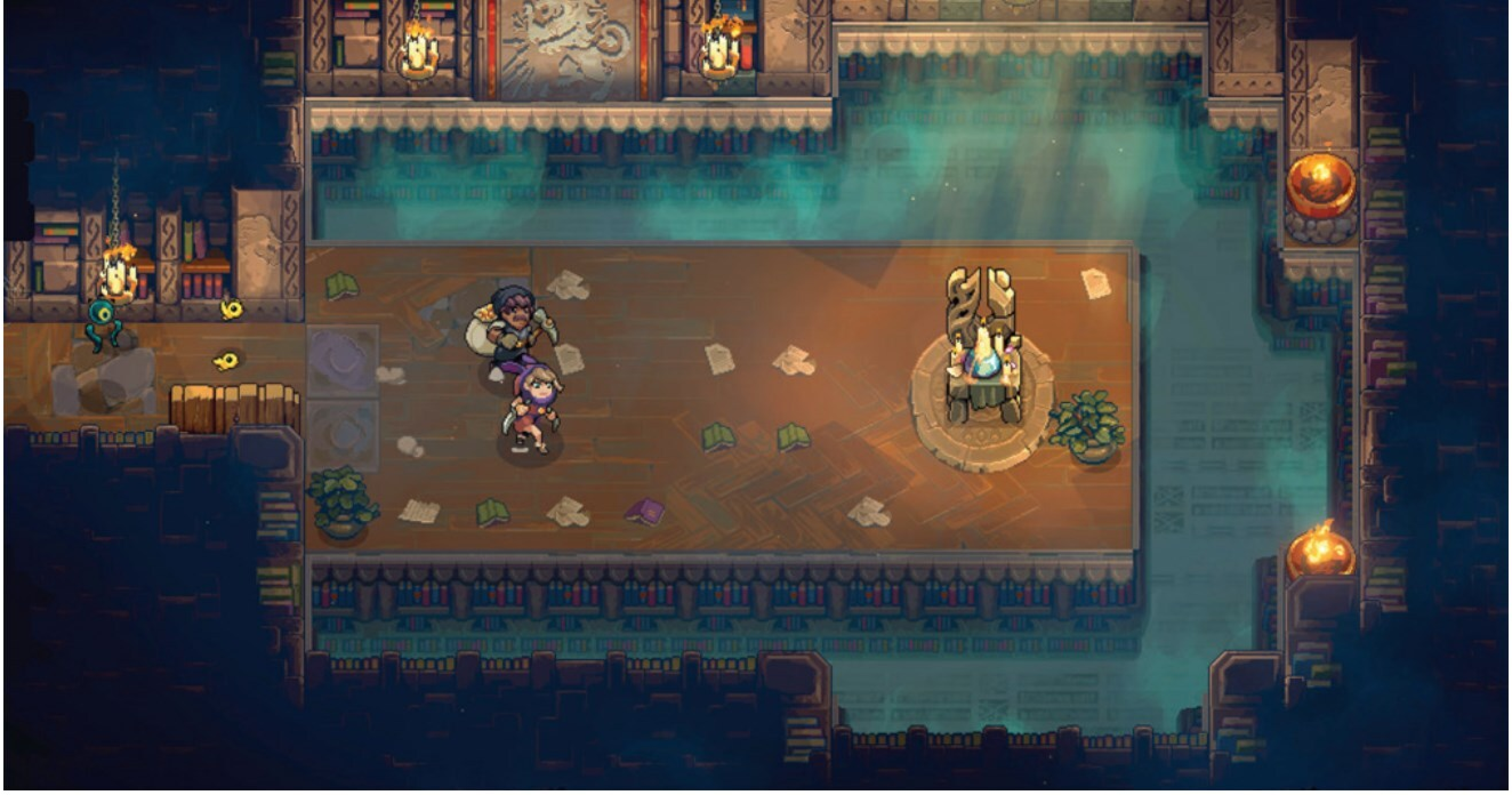
"We did kind of want to use all parts of the buffalo on this one," says Parkes. "I felt like with Before Your Eyes, it was very much like, 'Okay, the tech can do a lot more than just blink'...So we are trying to have fun with the camera. That's part of the fun for us is just being like, 'Okay, cool, what else can this weird controller do for us?'"

Like Before Your Eyes, Goodnight Universe can be played with traditional controls. Nice Dream says the face-tracking isn't as intrinsically tied to the game's storytelling and themes, so it feels more like an optional play mode. Nice Dream also describes the game as more mechanically dense, featuring more traditional puzzle-solving. For example, players use their powers to complete a checklist of creative tasks inspired by titles like Untitled Goose Game. The game also features narrative branching based on decision-making moments.

If you're still emotionally recovering from Before Your Eyes, Nice Dream describes Goodnight Universe as a lighter, wackier adventure by comparison. That doesn't mean it won't have heavy or heartfelt moments, but given that Isaac's abduction by a shady government agency is the central plot point, it's a more comedic but tonally balanced adventure. Before Your Eyes floored us with its originality and writing, and we're excited to see how this spiritual follow-up matures over the coming months. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Skybound Games
DEVELOPER Nice Dream
RELEASE 2025





UNDERMINE 2

Bringing back the mine obsession

In screenshots alone, Undermine 2 is not a radical visual reinvention of the first game – a rogue game where you make your way deeper and deeper into a mine to discover its secrets. In motion, however, you can see all the bells and whistles Thorium developer duo Clint Tasker and Derek Johnson have brought to its sequel. The art style remains consistent, but new lighting gives everything an impressive shine. Shadows move and bounce in 3D despite being a 2D game. Your character now has a full animation when they leap over chasms and enemy attacks, and they drop to the ground with a satisfying thud. But the real changes present themselves when you spend time with the game.

"We would talk about the ideal," creative director Clint Tasker says. "It was our goal to continue updating Undermine as much as The Binding of Isaac had been updated, for like a decade or something, just over and over. That's still our ambition, but we wanted to start from a much cleaner, much more sound place." Undermine 2 will enter Early Access at some point and Tasker and Johnson are building the game with the future in mind. They want to be able to update the game often and quickly, and are planning to support community mod ambitions as well. But in the short term, I did spend time with the current version of Undermine 2.

The original game was a surprise obsession. The rogue genre had never clicked with me before, but something about Undermine's progression and shortcuts kept me focused and returning to the mine over and over. I was eager to spend time with the sequel and Tasker and Johnson walked me through many of the new features.

Big highlights include local co-op and new playable characters. I begin the game playing as Black Rabbit, who appeared as an NPC in the previous game. She uses much faster dual daggers and dashes instead of leaps, reminding me of games like Hyper Light Drifter and Hades, which Tasker and Johnson were totally fine with being compared to. "We do it all the time," Tasker says, joking that while he humbly appreciates seeing Undermine often appear high in rogue tier lists, he is not sure he necessarily agrees. "We want to be in the conversation with Dead Cells, Binding of Isaac, and Spelunky."

I only make it through a few rooms as Black Bunny before dying on my tutorial run in my own play session, and Tasker reminds me that the game is meant to be challenging, but not to the point of pushing players away. "I like games like Souls games that don't have difficulty settings, necessarily, not because I want to punish bad players until they get good," Tasker says. "I like players to have the same story to talk about. The same experience. And you do want to encourage players to overcome things they think they can't do."

There will be more options for players to enter the mines and have more agency over the build they want to craft. New rooms offer the ability to trade keys and other resources to acquire consistent upgrades. "We are tuning the game to be very hard, but we're tuning it to expect you to put together very focused, very synergistic builds."

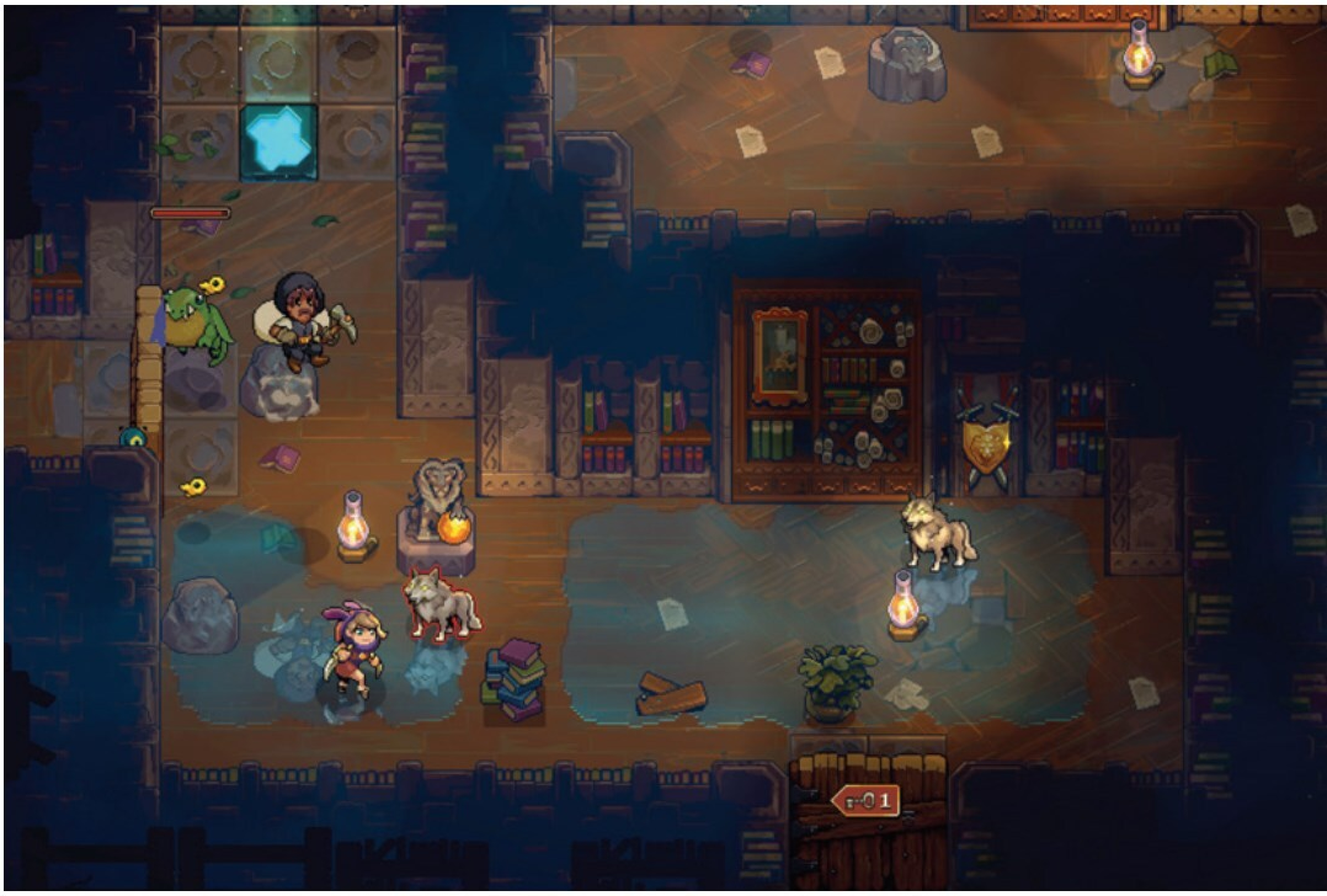
Tasker and Johnson, however, do not want to gatekeep the game for players who don't have the skill or desire to be challenged. Accessibility options familiar to games like Dead Cells that let you turn off death or turn on invincibility, for example, will be available to those who just want to see what Undermine 2 has to offer, but are not able to see the game to its conclusion. "It feels really crappy to say, 'Sorry. You gotta be good,'" Tasker says.

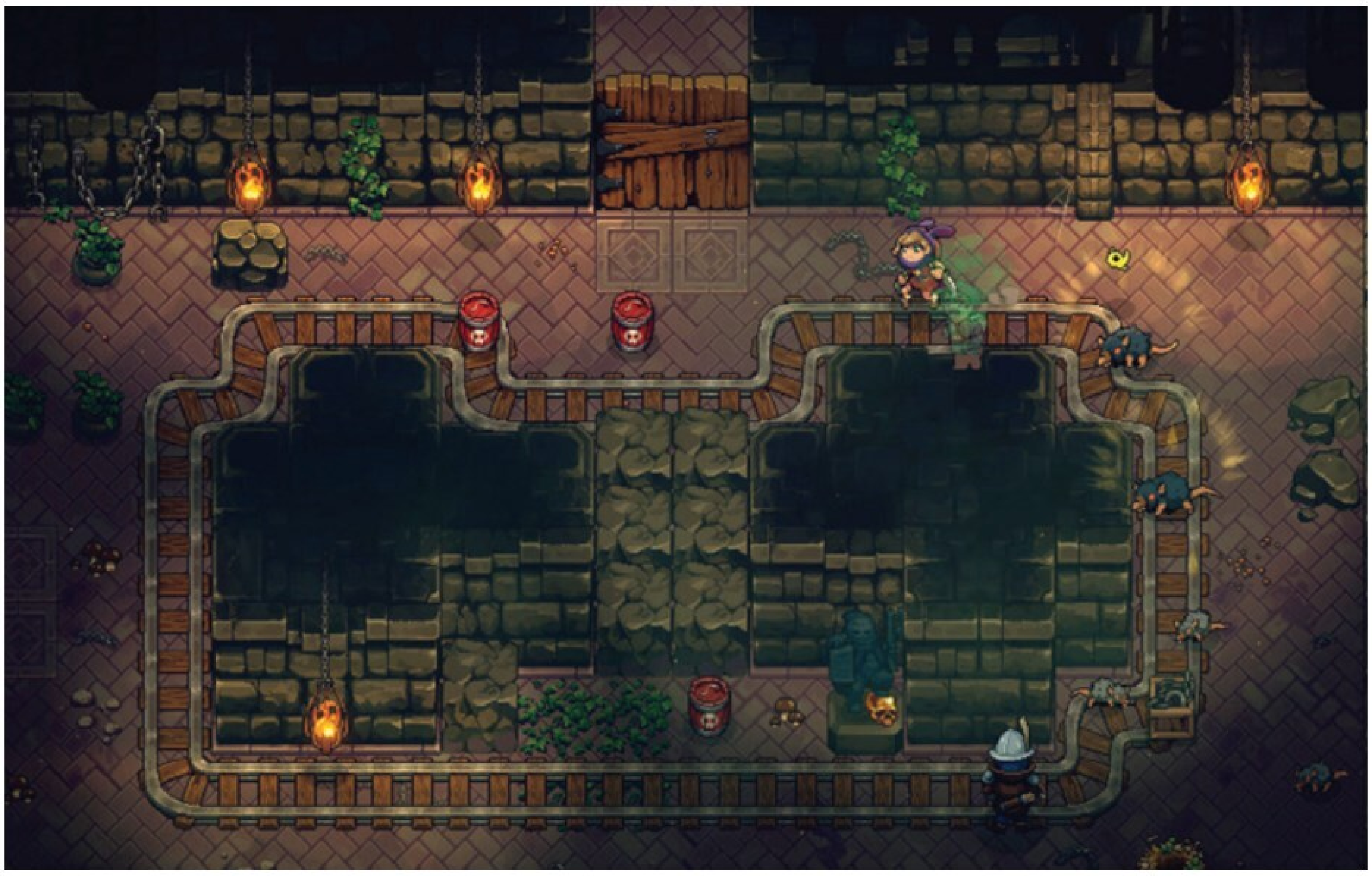
After losing Black Bunny (who I can apparently recover later), I am back to the original Peasant character. Unsurprisingly, the game does feel familiar, but controlling my peasant looks and feels better. Dangers are better broadcast, the jumping animation I referenced earlier makes movement feel smoother, and fast travel makes a small but significant change. Now, once you clear a room of enemies on a floor, you can pull up the map and fast travel to it immediately. It sounds like a small thing, but it is by far my most used new mechanic. Bouncing around the floors searching for secrets is easier and faster, and it cuts down on unnecessary downtime overall.

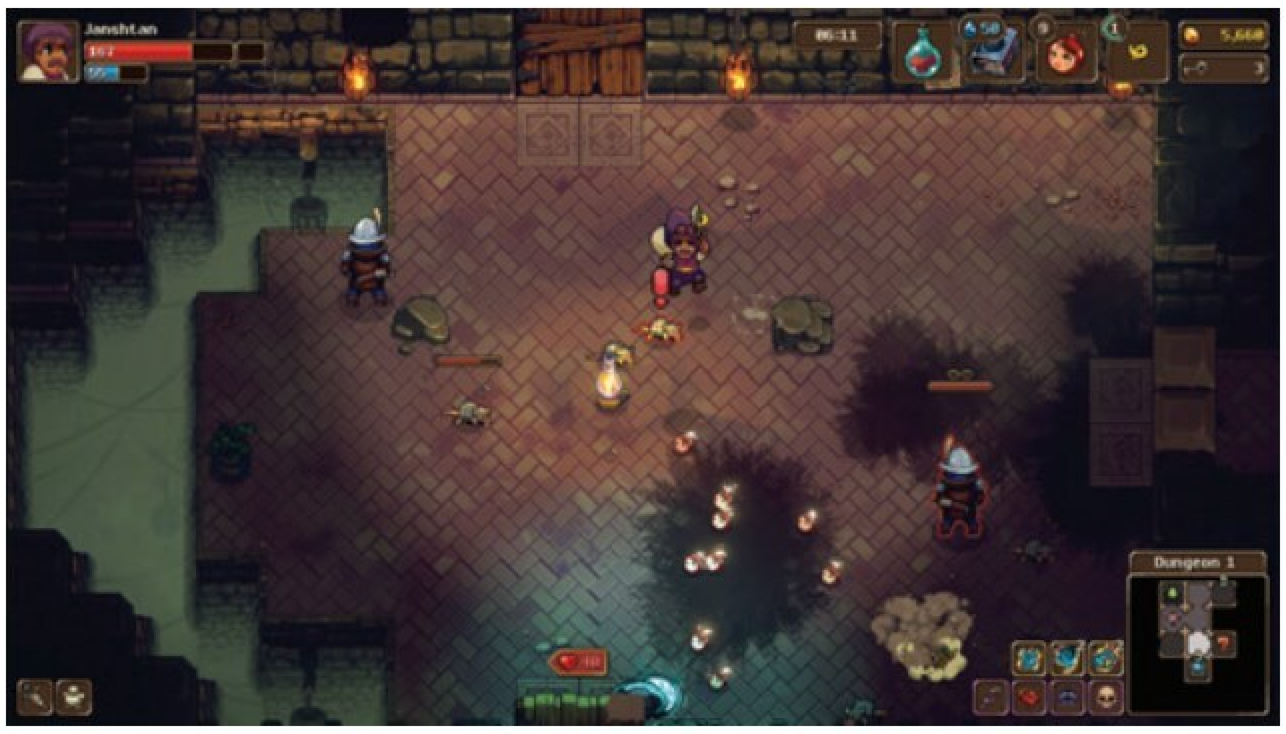
After loving the first game and spending time with Tasker, Johnson, and the sequel, I am confident about Undermine 2 and am already itching for just one more run, even with the early-early access build I was afforded. “In our own minds, there is still work to do, and there are no excuses with this game,” Tasker says. “We built it the way we want to build it and it’s exactly what we want it to be. Hopefully, it’s exactly what players want it to be, too.” **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

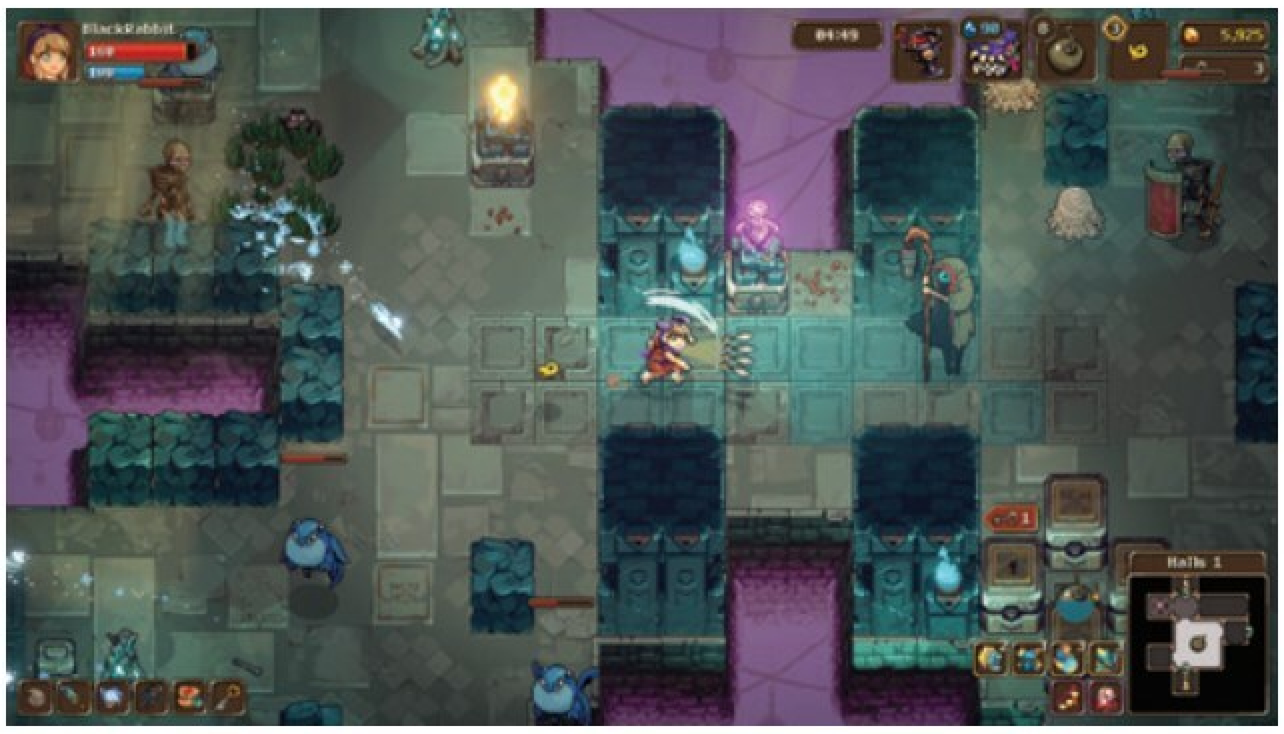
Get an exclusive look at gameplay on our YouTube channel

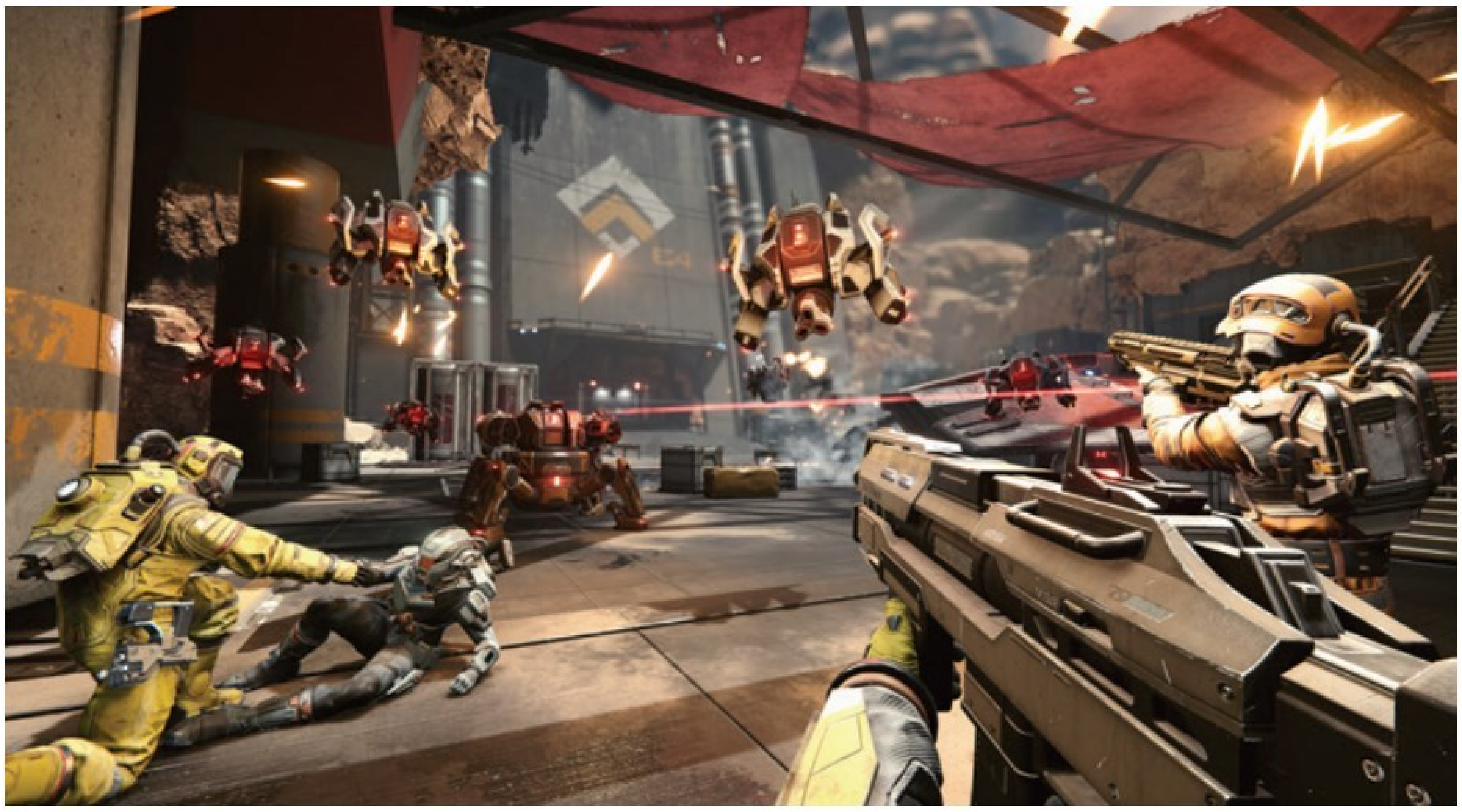
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Action
PUBLISHER Thorium
DEVELOPER Thorium **RELEASE** TBA











JUMP SHIP

Making the dream work

An oft-neglected yet potent fantasy of space exploration games is managing your ship and crew. Blasting apart enemy vessels is thrilling, of course, but Star Trek fans know it can be equally engaging to repair your vehicle and dictate tasks to your crewmates, especially if they're your friends. Jump Ship, a cooperative space shooter by Swedish developer Keepsake Games, channels this aspect of the fantasy and more to create what it hopes to be a wholly satisfying sci-fi romp.

Either alone or, preferably, in a group of up to four, players explore the galaxy to complete missions in their upgradable starship. While cruising through space, you can jump to various sectors and engage in dogfights with enemy ships. You can also transition to exploring the interior of your ship, which includes a bridge, engine room, airlock, and other areas. Maintaining the ship's integrity involves upgrading systems or performing repairs, such as extinguishing machines that caught fire during combat.

Assigning tasks to each player can help efficiently manage systems such as the ship's power grid, engines, and shields. Players can even exit the ship to conduct spacewalks to give the exterior some TLC. Working as a well-oiled crew is essential and can be the difference between a smooth journey or exploding into a fireball of debris in the recesses of space.

You are directed to various planets as you tackle hand-crafted missions that feature randomized elements so no two runs are alike. Seamless exploration means you can manually visit and land on worlds to engage in on-foot gameplay. Here, you scavenge for resources and loot to improve yourselves and your ship while blasting apart hostiles in first-person shooter gameplay. A jetpack and grappling hook also allow players more maneuverability on the ground.

Teamwork is critical, as Jump Ship encourages players to combine their tools to fend off attackers, such as killer machines, and return to the ship safely with loot in tow. Even this doesn't guarantee success, as enemy ships could appear to prevent your escape, transitioning the gameplay back into explosive aerial ship battles.

Between missions, you'll return to your hangar, which is an explorable home base. Here, you'll purchase new equipment and augment your ship with improvements. You can also just goof off with your friends; a trailer showed two players playing a quick soccer game on the landing pad.

Keepsake Games plans to launch Jump Ship into Steam Early access sometime this year. It's slated to come to Xbox at some point, but it remains to be seen if it will hit other platforms. If you have a friend group on the hunt for the next cooperative PvE game, Jump Ship may be worth keeping on your radar.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Keepsake Games
DEVELOPER Keepsake Games **RELEASE** 2024 (PC Early Access), Xbox TBA

STARSHIP TROOPERS: EXTERMINATION

Does it have what it takes to be a Citizen?

Paul Verhoeven's prescient fascism satire sci-fi movie about the dangers of government propaganda was a moderate hit when it was released in 1997, but it's fair to say audiences didn't fully understand it at the time. In the years since, it has become a beloved cult classic, spawning movie sequels, TV shows, and of course games. Extermination is not the first Starship Troopers video game, but it may be the one most in line with the action seen in the films.

The game is currently available in Early Access on Steam, but alongside a group of other game journalists, I played a not-yet-released build of the game with its lead, Peter Maurice. With a few months to go until the game enters 1.0, Starship Troopers: Extermination feels like it has its core idea and repeatable loop down. Maurice says Offworld's primary goal (which is only made up of about 30 developers) is to complete the game, but it is already implementing all kinds of new game-changing mechanics in Early Access.

For example, the build we play features weak spots for the bugs for players with skillful aim – a critical element of the films, of which it is clear Maurice knows well. When one player on our team noted something electrocuted them and shot them across the map, Maurice is eager to explain what happened. "Oh, you just got hit by a Bombardier Bug! The Bombardier Bug is a bug introduced in [*Starship Troopers 3: Marauder*]," Maurice says.

The actual gameplay feels closest to something like Left 4 Dead. We make our way across a large map fighting what feels like thousands of bugs and completing side objectives until we reach the final confrontation. Here, I participate in perhaps Extermination's defining mechanic: base building. Together with a handful of other players, we build a base and line it with turrets to prepare for the onslaught.

The structures you erect fast are big, and you truly feel like a team putting them together as the more players are "building" something, the faster it appears. Both of our attempts against the bugs go poorly, with only a few of us making it to extraction, but it was an intense, chaotic encounter every time.

Of course, you can't talk about Starship Troopers and video games without addressing the Helldivers 2-shaped elephant in the room. Sony's highly successful multiplayer game is a Starship Troopers game in all but license. It shares a parody tone with the films, also comments on fascism and propaganda, and features a war against alien bugs.

"We're very happy for our fellow developers over at [Helldivers 2 studio] Arrowhead," Maurice says. "They've produced a really good and compelling game. We're hoping to achieve the same when we have our finished game coming out later this year."

There's no doubt that the two games will draw comparisons, but Maurice is optimistic. "We never begrudge success in our industry. It's so hard to achieve as developers. It's very hard to achieve a success, and we've already achieved our level of success on PC as an Early Access title. We're looking toward finishing it in the next three or four months." **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 16-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Offworld, Knights Peak **DEVELOPER** Offworld **RELEASE** October 11

FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL

The (Dawn)trail we blaze

Soon, Warriors of Light will be entering yet another new chapter in Creative Studio III's latest expansion: Dawntrail. Final Fantasy XIV has had quite a journey since its release in 2013, and like many, I have been curious where this new adventure will lead, both narratively and in terms of gameplay. I had a chance to spend seven hours with Dawntrail ahead of its release in July and speak with the developers to learn more about what to expect from the next big expansion.

For this preview, I traveled through a few new zones, slayed some overworld bosses, and explored the first dungeon players enter upon starting Dawntrail. Square Enix obscured anything that might spoil the story, so you can read this without fear. As far as we know, the plan is to have fun on our summer vacation after saving the universe with a sprinkle of friendly competition against our fellow Scions.

On the technical side, I saw the graphical update that will be implemented when the expansion goes live. Executive producer and director Naoki Yoshida and other staff members say the graphical update we saw is not the final version. The update is impressive even knowing I was not looking at finalized visuals. I liken it to a fresh coat of paint on a car; it's great to look at when you first see it, but after driving around in it for a while, you probably won't think about it too much.

The gameplay is, expectedly, familiar. Every job has new-expansion shiny buttons to press, and a few of them received mild to moderate reworks. Viper and Pictomancer are the expansion headliners. The former plays fast with lots of contextual combo choices, and the latter is all about planning your paintings (called motifs) to maximize your output. Both options are exciting in their own way, and I appreciate the fresh aesthetic.

Speaking with Yoshida, he states that Dawntrail is the expansion the team is focusing more on developing as an MMORPG. Starting in Shadowbringers and continuing through Endwalker, Yoshida wanted to make the game more appealing to those uncomfortable playing MMORPGs by improving the single-player elements of the game. Now, the team feels the game is in a good spot to refine the multiplayer aspect. He's not ready to offer specifics but does reference concepts like tackling a boss with 24 players or even at a larger scale with 80 to 100 players. It's unclear if that would be done through traditional methods like alliance raids or field operations. Creative Studio 3 is currently just taking a closer look at those concepts.

Yoshida also discussed delivering a more fulfilling gameplay experience. He says the development team had heard feedback and harsh criticism from players about certain combat elements, which led the developers to design fights to be less stressful. In Dawntrail, Yoshida wants the combat developers to feel like they can be more creative with encounter design.

The goal is to provide more opportunities for players to do new and unique mechanics that give a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment when successfully solved without unnecessary stress. Yoshida is quick to point out

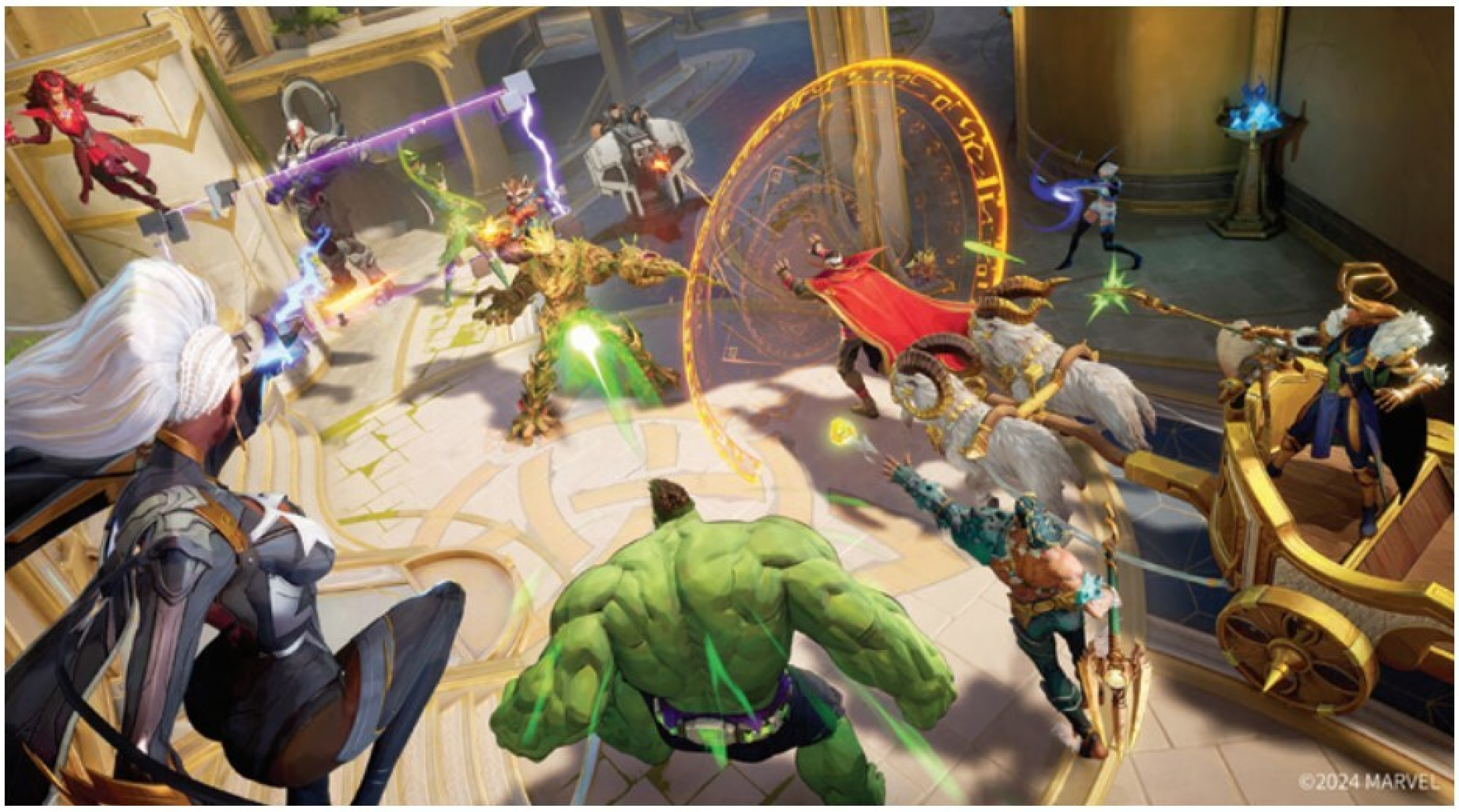
that this isn't to be taken as a raise in general difficulty – most of what the team has planned will come after the main story and in future patches, so players can expect the content associated with the story to be similar in difficulty to what we have experienced so far.

As a seasoned player who has sunk 8,000 hours into the game, I'm aware some players, particularly those in the high-end raiding community, have reservations about the direction the gameplay has gone since Shadowbringers. Yoshida and company are listening to players and encouraging everyone to provide feedback, perhaps more kindly than some have historically done, so they can provide us with the best experience possible. I am still wondering where Dawtrail's journey will take me narratively and how the gameplay will evolve with the player base. However, after speaking with Yoshida, playing the jobs, and seeing the upgraded visuals, I am inclined to trust the Final Fantasy XIV team and am hopeful about launch. **BY JON WOODEY**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
STYLE MMORPG **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix Creative Studio III
RELEASE July 2

MARVEL RIVALS

Avengers still assembling



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While Overwatch was once an undisputed titan in the gaming world, recent years have seen that prestige diminish greatly, leaving many fans eager for a replacement. Enter Marvel Rivals: an extremely similar game that swaps Blizzard's original characters for heroes and villains from the beloved comic book universe. We went hands-on at Summer Game Fest to check it out for ourselves, and while it doesn't seem like a full Overwatch replacement quite yet, it has the potential to grow and fill that space over time.

Games follow two teams of six players, each jockeying to complete certain objectives, like escorting a vehicle or capturing certain areas around the map. "Shooter" is the most efficient term to describe the game, but it paints an incomplete picture; many characters have guns or gun-like abilities, but many don't, making it feel a bit more close quarters than other games in the genre. As a die-hard Spider-Man fan, I jump into the first game as the famous wall-crawler but immediately encounter a stiff learning curve as I realize how distinct his playstyle is compared to the other characters. He's fast and extremely mobile, which requires more skill than someone with a traditional shooter moveset. I swing around and try my best to outwit my opponents, but it's my first game – I am unsuccessful.

After a few deaths, I realize no one on the team in this preview event picked a support character, so I switch over to Loki, who can heal allies with his staff. As a trickster god, he also helps by distracting foes with illusions he can teleport to and from, and his ultimate ability allows him to completely transform into an enemy character for a short time, copying their entire moveset. I have some fun with him, but once again find myself a tad overwhelmed and realize he will take as much (if not more) getting used to as Spider-Man would.

These two are a small sample compared to the current roster of 19 characters, but it surprises me how unintuitive these two initially feel. One match with a character is not nearly enough to properly asses their abilities, but Marvel Rivals will likely attract a broad audience with its recognizable characters and free-to-play structure, and complex characters will keep newer or younger players from sticking with it. This does not strike me as a bad thing, per se, only different than my initial impressions – this game is aiming to be a real competitive experience, not something quick and breezy like Fortnite.

It's not until I swap over to Scarlet Witch that I'm truly comfortable in the game, as her abilities are a lot more straightforward than the others. Her main attack button fires quick blasts of energy, and successful hits generate chaos energy, allowing her to blast a secondary, powerful ranged attack. Our goal this round is to stop the opposing team from escorting a slow-moving vehicle to the other side of the map, and despite my late Witch-switch, my understanding of the game improves enough for me to take out several enemies at once, especially a pesky shield-generating Magneto that had been protecting his teammates. We ended up winning that game (even though one teammate spent the match experimenting with ramps away from the battle as Groot), and I came away feeling generally positive about the experience.

There are plenty of other mysteries about the game, especially in how it plans to handle monetization, an implementation that can easily make or break the game. It has the potential to be great, but as we've seen with the legacy of Overwatch, a lot of that comes down to how much NetEase listens to its fanbase. Marvel Rivals isn't quite there yet, but if it's handled well, it's a game we could all be playing for a long time.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 12-Player Action
PUBLISHER NetEase Games
DEVELOPER NetEase Games
RELEASE TBA

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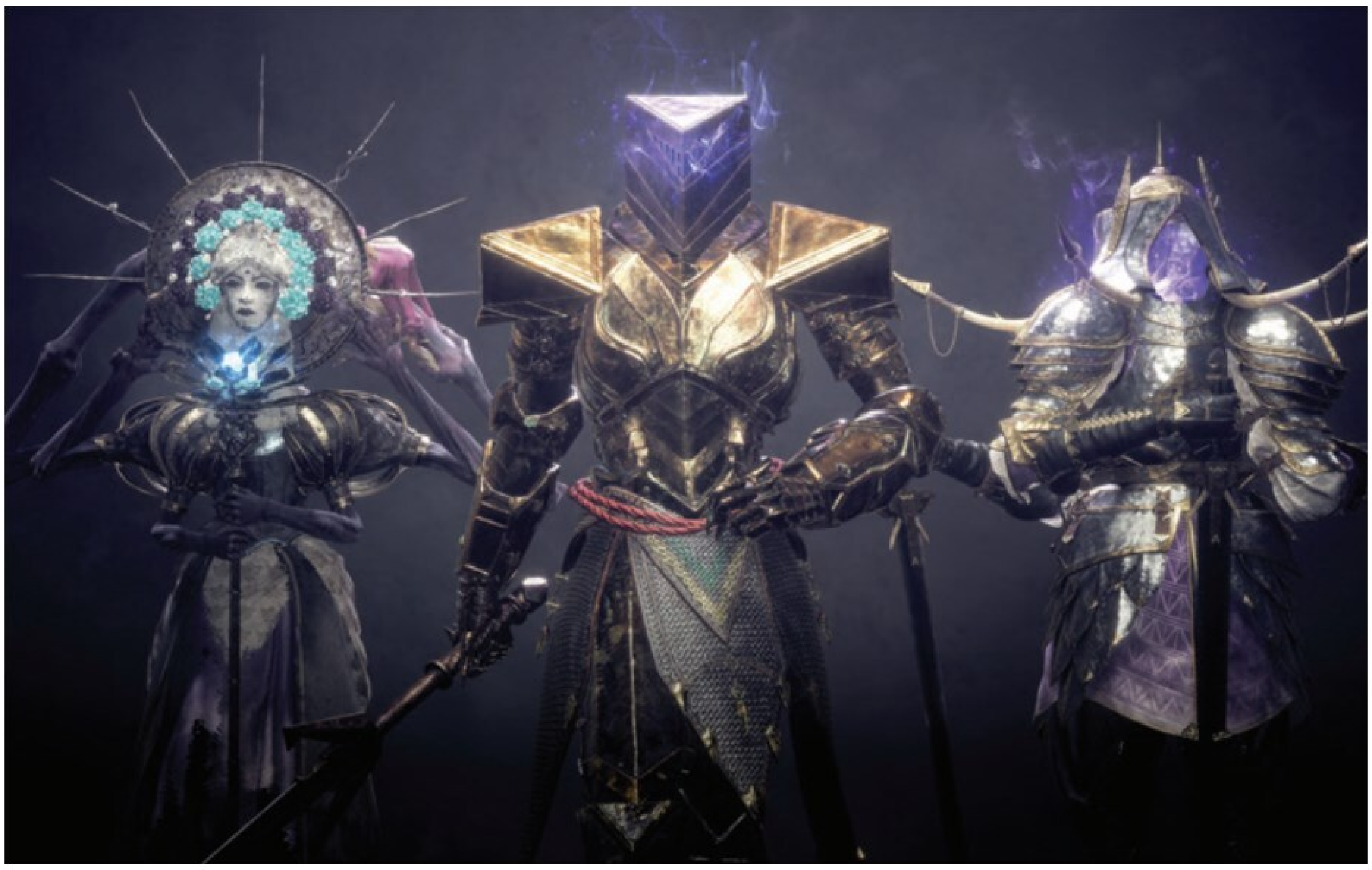


FLINTLOCK: THE SIEGE OF DAWN

A new take on gods

Fictional gods are commonplace in fantasy worlds, but in Western media, those gods often take on similar shapes. Inspired by Norse, Greek, and Roman mythology, these deities usually live in a heaven-like world above the humans on Earth and appear to be human-like but large and powerful. But when it comes to Flintlock: The Siege of Dawn, these are the exact design philosophies the developers at A44 wanted to avoid. "I really, really didn't want them to be interpreted as bigger humans," art director Marie-Charlotte Derne says.

The world of Kian, where Flintlock takes place, is in the midst of a conflict between humans and the gods of The Great Below, a land of the dead that had its doors opened into the human world ten years prior to the events of Flintlock's story. You play as Nor, a member of the human army battling against the dead using what A44 calls a "souls-lite" combat system. It has the structure of a Souls game, but the player isn't nearly as stiff as one in a FromSoftware title. With a double jump and an air dodge, mobility is a crucial part of combat strategy, and the game moves at a relatively quick pace.

Nor and her allies are facing off against the gods, but unlike some traditional deities, the gods of The Great Below don't have personal experience with the human world. They learn everything about Kian from the dead that enter their realm, so they have to form their own appearances and personalities based on secondhand information. "That's why all gods have elements of humanoid anatomy, for instance, but they also have that otherworldly kind of elements to them," Derne says. "You can tell they have arms and legs, but you can also tell something's not quite right."

To Derne's point, no god I'm shown during our interview has anything resembling a human face. There's a mask, a triangular helmet, and a fox-like quadruped, but even the most normal-looking gods are easy to distinguish from humans. Rammuha – the first goddess we speak about – doesn't even have a head, just a tent-like headpiece floating over an empty space above her shoulders. However, she has an otherwise humanoid body (if you exclude her extra arms), which is more than can be said for some other characters. Uru, guardian of the door of the dead, takes on a chimera-like form, with four legs, a long scorpion tail, and a three-eyed mask that lays below a solar eclipse that sits in a head of feathers.

I also speak with A44 studio head Simon Dasan, who explains that despite the gods' active conquest of the human world, they aren't necessarily evil.

"I know it presents this way, but we really don't want to think of [The Great Below] as a super bad place," he says. "It's actually a place of reverence for a lot of mankind." According to Dasan, gods are not inherently malicious beings, but their presence in the human world is a sign that something has gone wrong, and it's the player's journey to explore that throughout the story.

To aid this exploration is Enki, a feathered fox character that accompanies the protagonist, Nor. Despite Enki's relatively small stature, he is also a god, but he's just as interested in sending the others back to the Great Below as Nor is. I picked up that most of the other gods have a broad domain – knowledge, life, and order, for example – and I ask Dasan if Enki has a domain as well. He smiles knowingly and says, "He does, and that is something that will be revealed through the story."

From its fast-paced "souls-lite" gameplay to its unique world-building, there's a lot that interests me about Flintlock: The Siege of Dawn. But while I enjoyed interviewing these developers about its mysterious take on gods, I'm left with more questions than answers. Hopefully, I can satisfy my curiosity when the game launches this summer.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Kepler Interactive
DEVELOPER A44
RELEASE 2024

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

The scoundrel strikes back

In our latest look at Star Wars Outlaws ahead of its August release, Ubisoft prepared three missions from the game that offer a sense of the different gameplay styles we will encounter as Kay and her pet partner, Nix.

The first is a stealth mission, and Kay remains mostly crouched as she explores an Empire ship. While hiding, she highlights the first stormtrooper she sees in the distance, causing Nix's options to appear. Nix can attack, steal, or detonate, but Kay instead sends the adorable creature out to distract them so she can attack from behind. Kay pulls more stealth shenanigans and uses Nix to make her life easier at every turn. They really are a good team.

Her ship, *The Trailblazer*, is docked on the Empire ship with her pilot Waka trapped inside. Using a hacking minigame reminiscent of R2D2 in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, Kay manages to sound an alarm that mostly clears out the dock of stormtroopers – but not entirely. A firefight breaks out while she is making her way to the ship, and she uses all three of her pistol's abilities: plasma for general combat, ion for disabling shields and overcharging droids, and the stun attack, which shoots familiar blue circles. She also slows time and tags enemies to take them out in successive shots like a Red Dead Redemption cowboy.

Once in her ship, she and Waka fly into a debris field to lose the TIE Fighters on their trail. The most impressive part of this sequence happens before and after the space dogfight. Kay flies *The Trailblazer* through hallways (reminiscent of the climactic *Millennium Falcon* sequence from *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*) and then down to a neighboring planet. There are no Star Wars wipe transitions or cuts to black – Kay moves from space to the planet in one move. It's the kind of thing we've wanted to do in a Star Wars video game since the first film premiered in 1977.

Once on solid ground, Kay explores a populated location where stormtroopers stand guard against various doors and hallways but mostly leave her alone. While making her way to a contact, she gets a call from a character named Danka who asks, "Are you good at Sabbac?" Kay replies, "Yeah, I'm from Canto Bight," opening up an optional path she can undoubtedly pursue in the future. The feeling of a living Star Wars city is well sold, and that's all the more apparent in a separate presentation where Ubisoft showed off exploration on Tatooine's iconic Mos Eisley.

At this point in the expanded Star Wars mythos, exploring the planet where Luke Skywalker grew up feels like a cliché. Why do we spend so much time on this one remote desert planet when there are so many others to explore? It turns out the answer is that getting a chance to walk those sandy streets without a specific destination is riveting. I would be lying if I said I didn't get a thrill from seeing Kay get lost in the city while taking note of familiar creatures before walking into the bar where Han shot first.

The second mission sends Kay to a crashed High Republic Cruiser. It is falling apart, and Kay asks her friend Waka if this is the right call. "It's a calculated risk, Kay. And I am good at math," they reply. This sequence recalls Rey's exciting introduction in *The Force Awakens*. The chance to explore a gigantic downed ghost space ship is a fascinating idea, and I hope there will be chances to do it outside of dedicated story missions. Kay finds what she needs, but not before sprinting out of the ship mid-collapse in a sequence that would impress Nathan Drake.

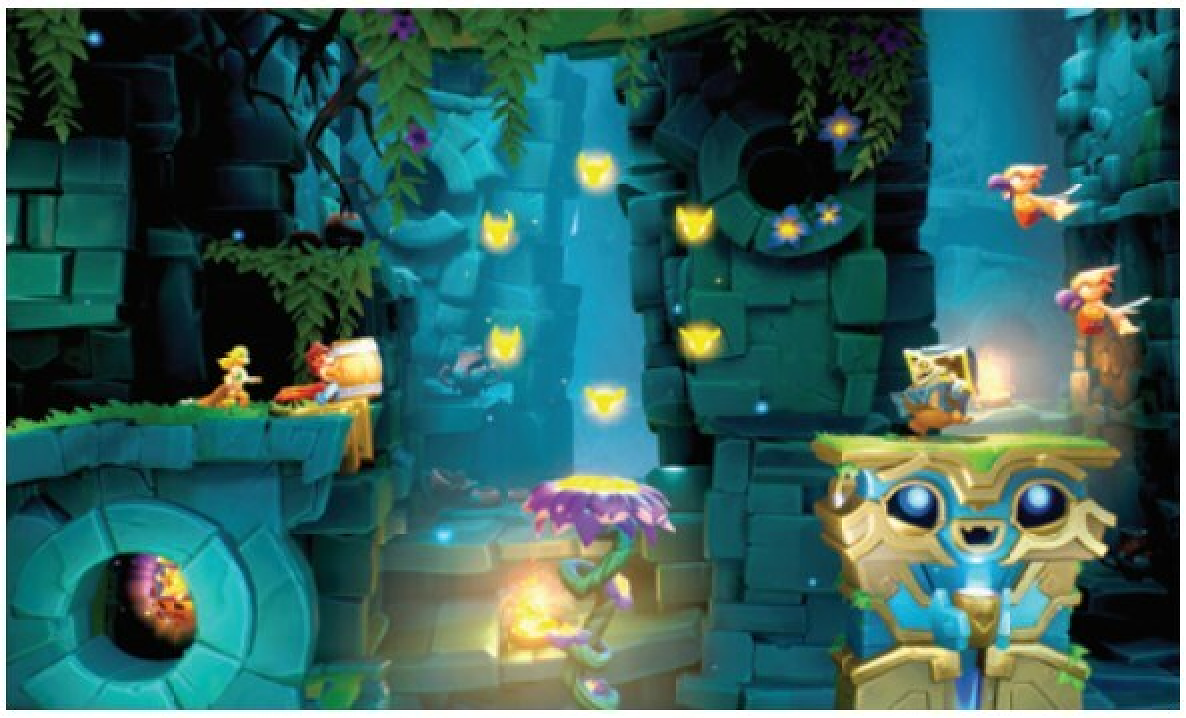
The last mission places Kay in a whole new area in the winter. She is wearing a jacket with a furlined hood that would make Han Solo ask, "I like that. Where did you get it?" Interestingly, at least one person she passes seems upset she's there, as though she will bring on some kind of danger with her presence. It seems Kay and Nix are becoming known throughout the galaxy for better but likely worse.

Kay is trying to recover a relic from a syndicate, which she plans to deliver to Crimson Dawn. She stealths her way in, blasts her way out, and meets with Queen Ashiga to deliver the relic and try and barter for the freedom of someone named Ank, which they are hesitant to do.

Outlaws' action is impressive, and I want to know more about Kay and Nix, but what struck me the most about this extended look at Outlaws was the downtime. Walking around open Star Wars cities without a specific goal is oddly exciting. I've played and even loved plenty of Star Wars games where I race, fight, and fly and while plenty of that will be happening here, it seems there will also be opportunities just to hang out. And that's something I haven't done much in the Star Wars universe. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Massive Entertainment
RELEASE August 30

NIKODERIKO: THE MAGICAL WORLD

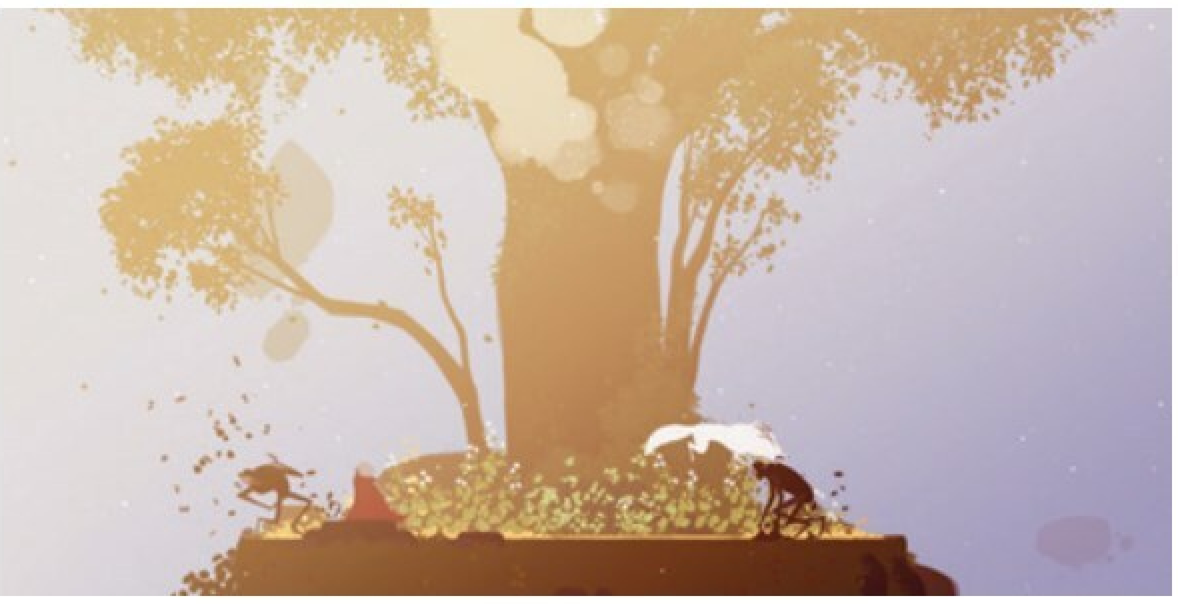


Developer VEA Games is wearing its inspiration on its sleeves for Nikoderiko. The titular Niko rides animals, collects four golden letters per level, occasionally jumps in barrels, rides minecarts, and his soundtrack is from David Wise, known for his work on the Donkey Kong Country games. And we're totally fine with it. We're overdue for a new mascot platformer, and our hands-on experience with the game makes us optimistic. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Platforming
PUBLISHER Knights Peak **DEVELOPER** VEA Games **RELEASE** 2024

NEVA

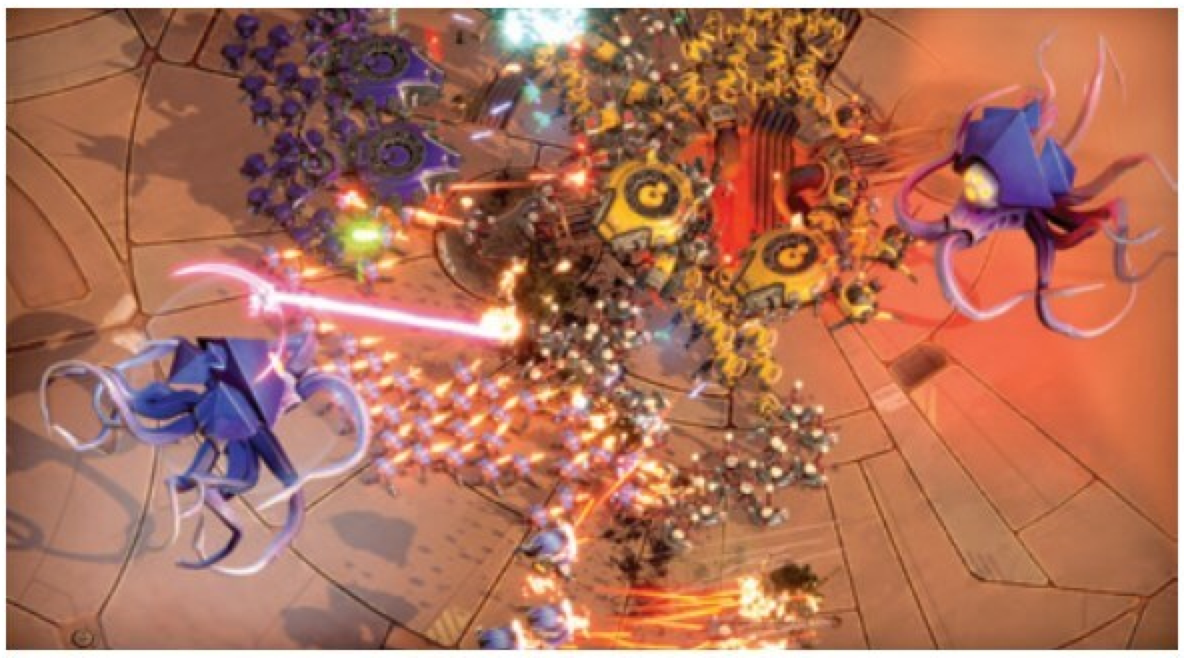
Following its poignant watercolor platformer, Gris, developer Nomada Studio presents a new gut-wrenching adventure focusing on an orphaned wolf cub, Neva, and a swordswoman named Alba. The story unfolds across passing seasons, during which the young wolf grows up and gains new abilities to aid the player in solving puzzles and overcoming combat challenges and boss fights. Nomada cites *Princess Mononoke* as a primary inspiration for not only its wolf-and-woman pair of protagonists, but also themes of conservation and companionship. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Nomada Studio **RELEASE** 2024

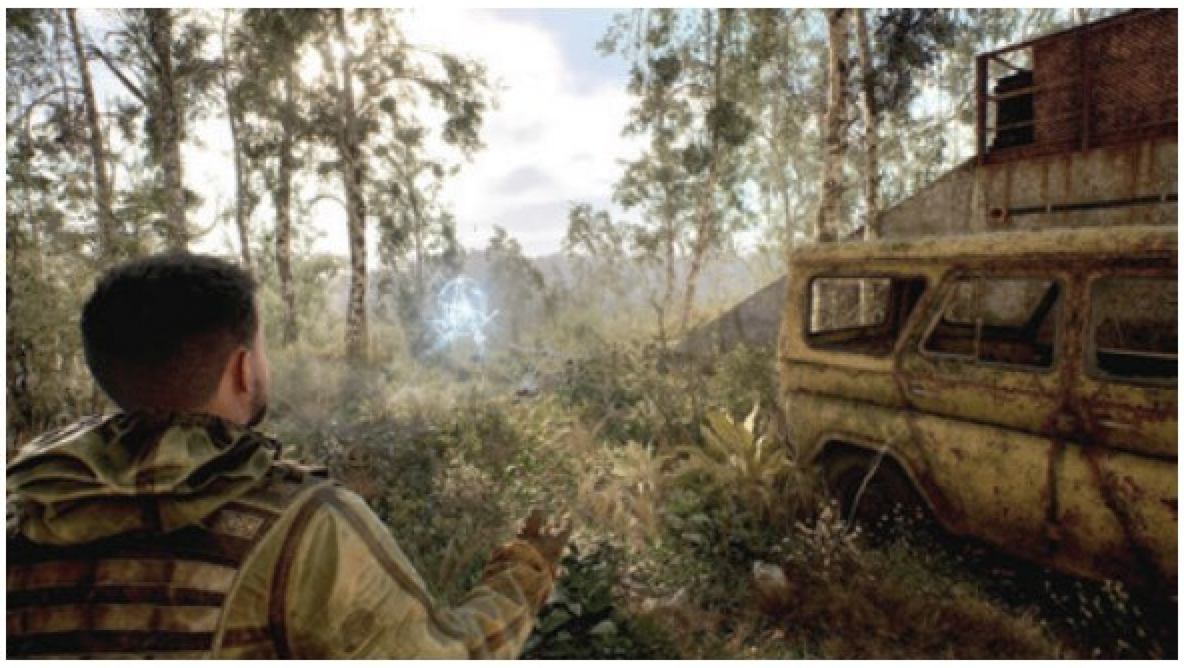
BATTLE ACES

Rallying developers from past strategy titles like StarCraft, Warcraft, and Company of Heroes, developer Uncapped Games aims to make its 10-minute real-time strategy title approachable for all audiences by stripping away base-building elements and focusing primarily on combat. Battle in 1v1 or 2v2 match-ups with custom armies comprised of giant crab-like mechs, anti-air units, tanks, or even gargantuan Krakens that blaze through ground enemies. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**



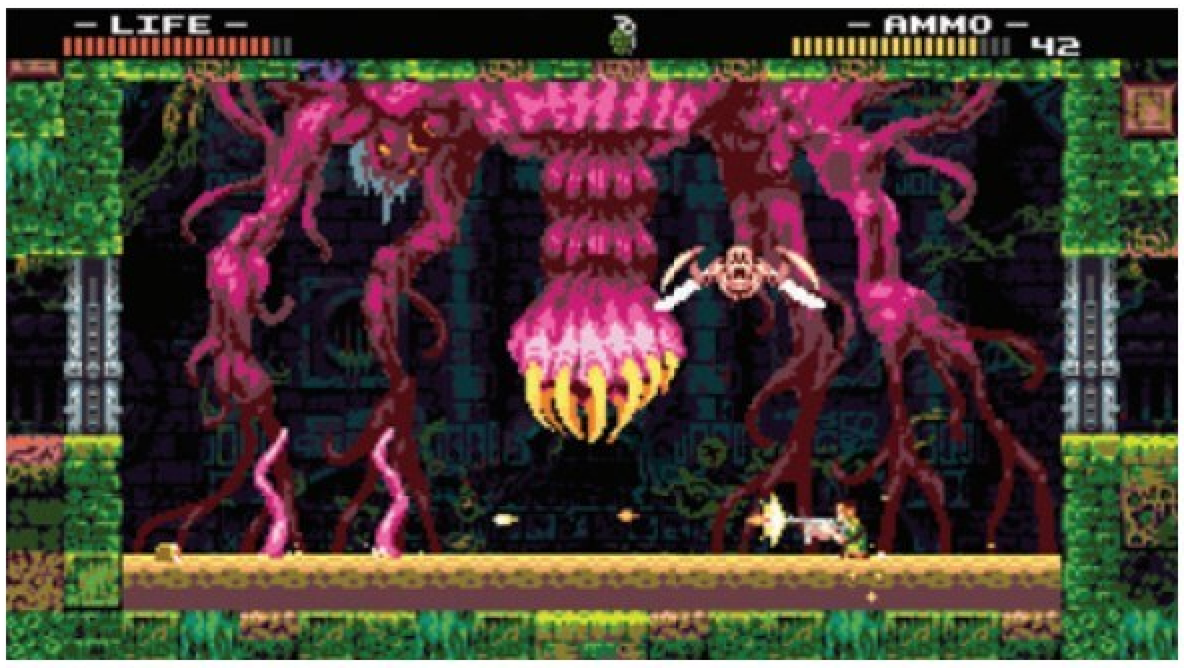
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** Online Multiplayer Strategy **PUBLISHER** Uncapped Games
DEVELOPER Uncapped Games **RELEASE** TBA

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL



15 years after the series' previous entry, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl presents a tense, atmospheric open world within a post-apocalyptic eastern Europe. You must manage your wellness and radiation exposure while scavenging for new weapons, ammo, and food in an environment brimming with fleshy monstrosities. Despite being underwhelmed by the shooting mechanics in my hands-on demo at Summer Game Fest, I am still curious to see more from Heart of Chornobyl. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER GSC Game World **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World **RELEASE** September 5



WOLFHOUND

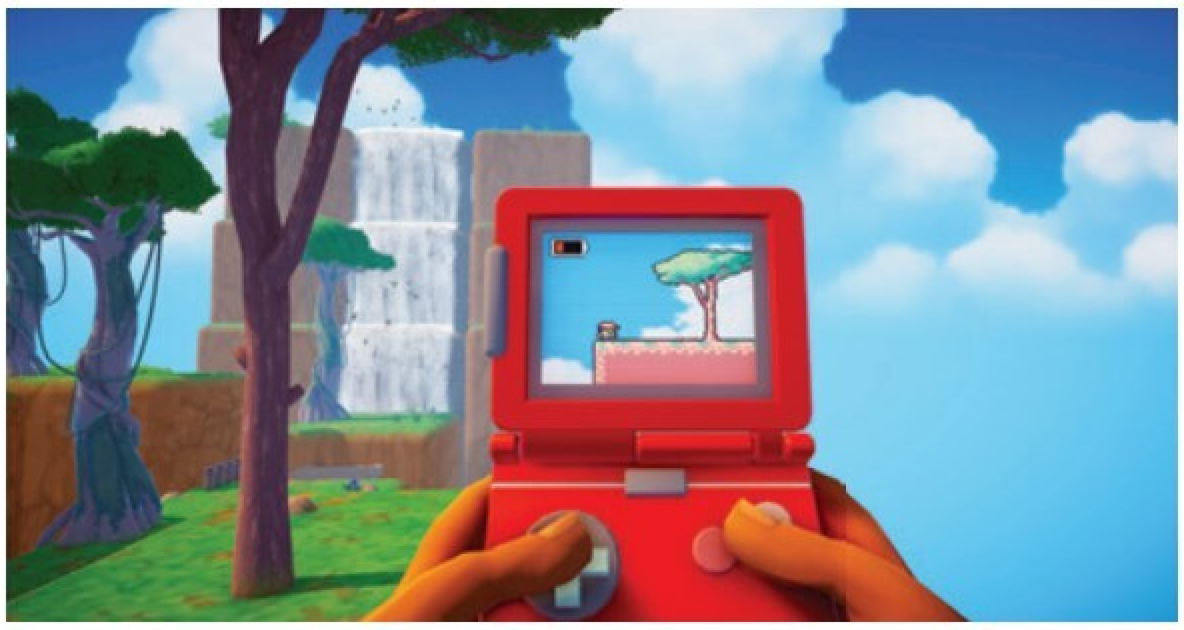
Wolfhound is a Metroid-inspired action game that borrows additional inspiration from another NES classic: Metal Gear. While there is no sneaking and the game is firmly an exploratory action game with ability upgrades and a map that fills in as you investigate, the time, setting, and protagonist (Christmas 1944 in a mysterious jungle starring Capt. Charles "Wolfhound" Rossetti) all feel straight out of Metal Gear in a way I appreciate. The fact that it plays exceptionally well is a bonus. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC • Consoles TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Bit Kid, Inc.
DEVELOPER Bit Kid, Inc. **RELEASE** 2025

SCREENBOUND

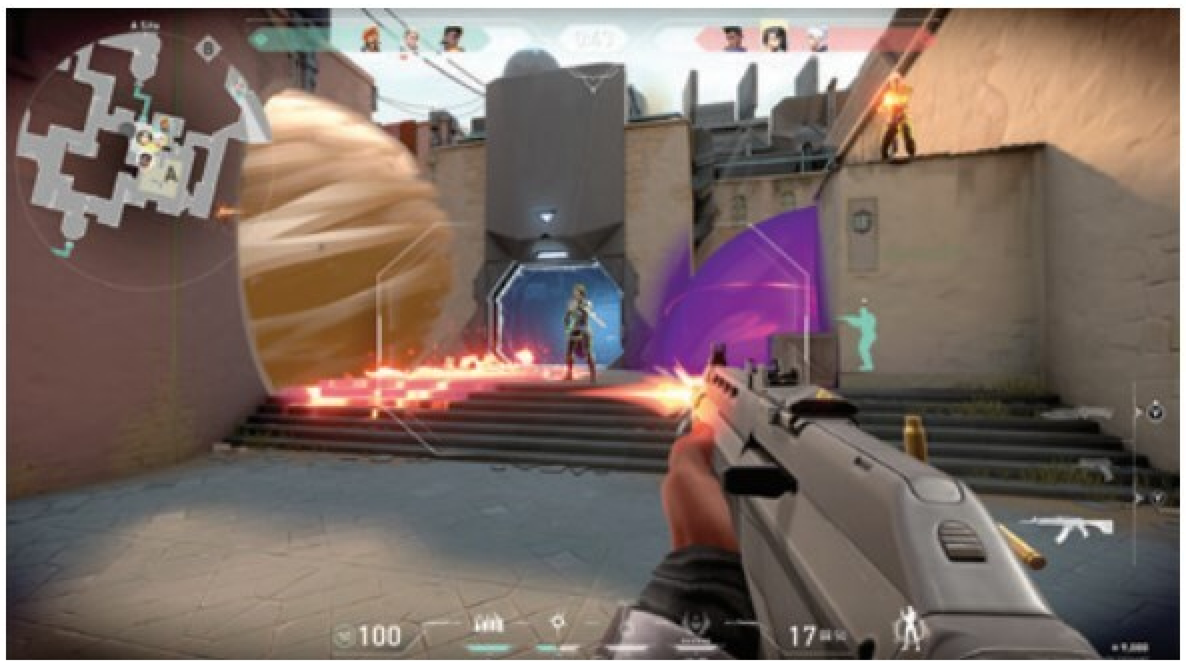
We've likely all done some form of multi-screen multitasking with a game on one monitor and a show on the other, but in Screenbound, it's a central game mechanic. While navigating a first-person 3D area, you'll have to simultaneously manage a 2D sidescroller using a handheld device. You can only see enemies in the 2D world, but you'll have to pay attention to the 3D world to platform properly. It's a unique pitch that I can't wait to get my hands on. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Crescent Moon Games, Those Dang Games
DEVELOPER Crescent Moon Games, Those Dang Games **RELEASE** TBD



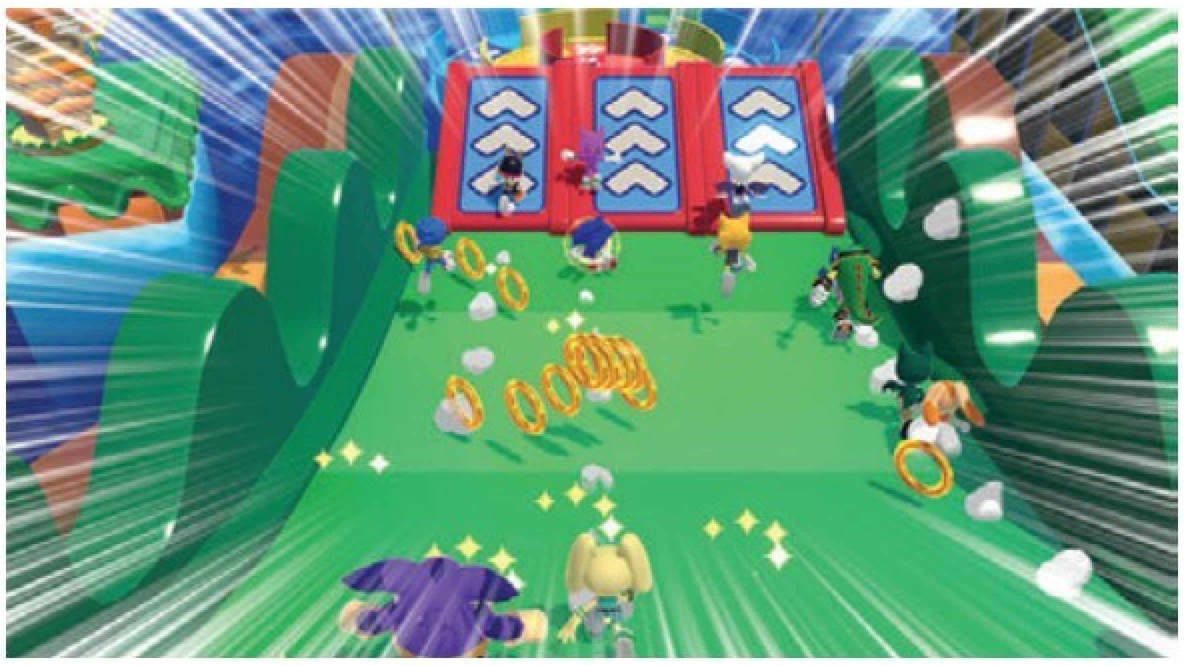
VALORANT

During Summer Game Fest, we learned Riot Games' Valorant, which launched on PC in 2020, is coming to consoles later this year. The 5v5 hero shooter arrives on PS5 and Xbox Series X/S with smooth and responsive controller-based gameplay, cross-progression, and a new focus mode that happens when you aim down the sights of your weapon. Look for the free-to-play tactical hero shooter to arrive on your favorite current-gen console later this year. **BY BRIAN SHEA**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S **STYLE** 10-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Riot Games **DEVELOPER** Riot Games **RELEASE** 2024

SONIC RUMBLE



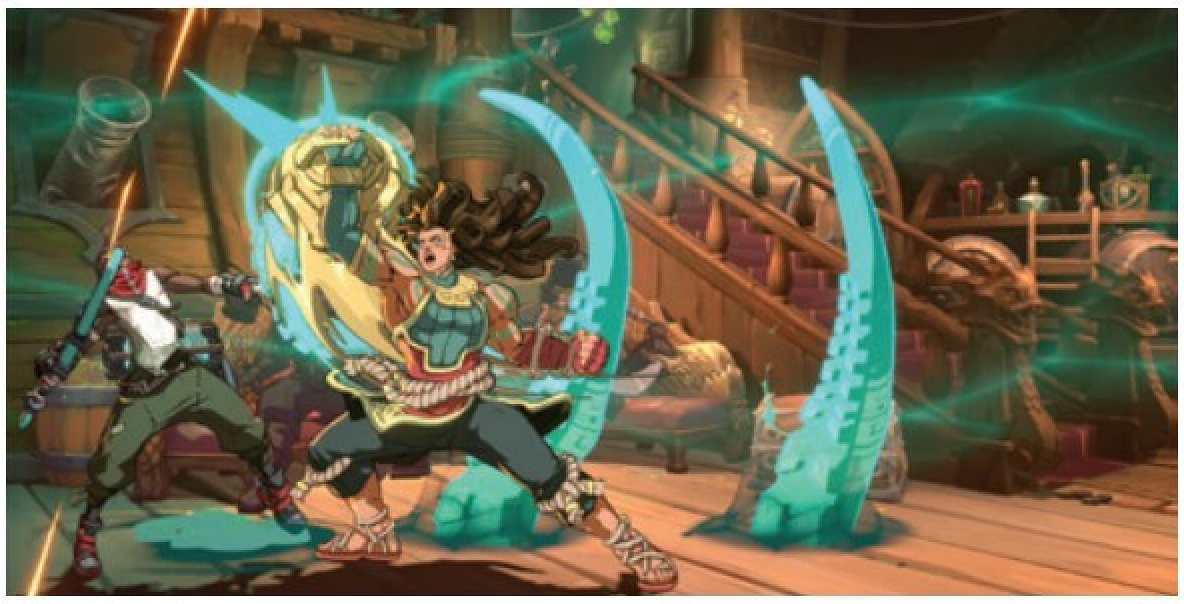
Hoping to capitalize on the success of titles like Fall Guys, Sonic Rumble represents the first collaborative development effort between Sega and the recently acquired Angry Birds developers, Rovio Entertainment. A 32-player round-based battle royale with racing and survival-style minigames, Sonic Rumble puts players in control of customizable toy versions of iconic characters across the Sonic universe. Look for Sonic Rumble to arrive on mobile devices later this year. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM iOS • Android **STYLE** 32-Player Online Party **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Sega, Rovio Entertainment **RELEASE** Late 2024

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VII

The Civilization series has been going strong for 30 years and is the cornerstone of developer Firaxis' (XCOM, Marvel's Midnight Suns) endurance, but we were still surprised to learn it's time for a new entry in the strategy franchise. It's the kind of series known and beloved even by those who don't play a lot of video games, and though we won't learn more about the game until later this year, we're already confident about it. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy (Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** 2K **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games **RELEASE** 2025



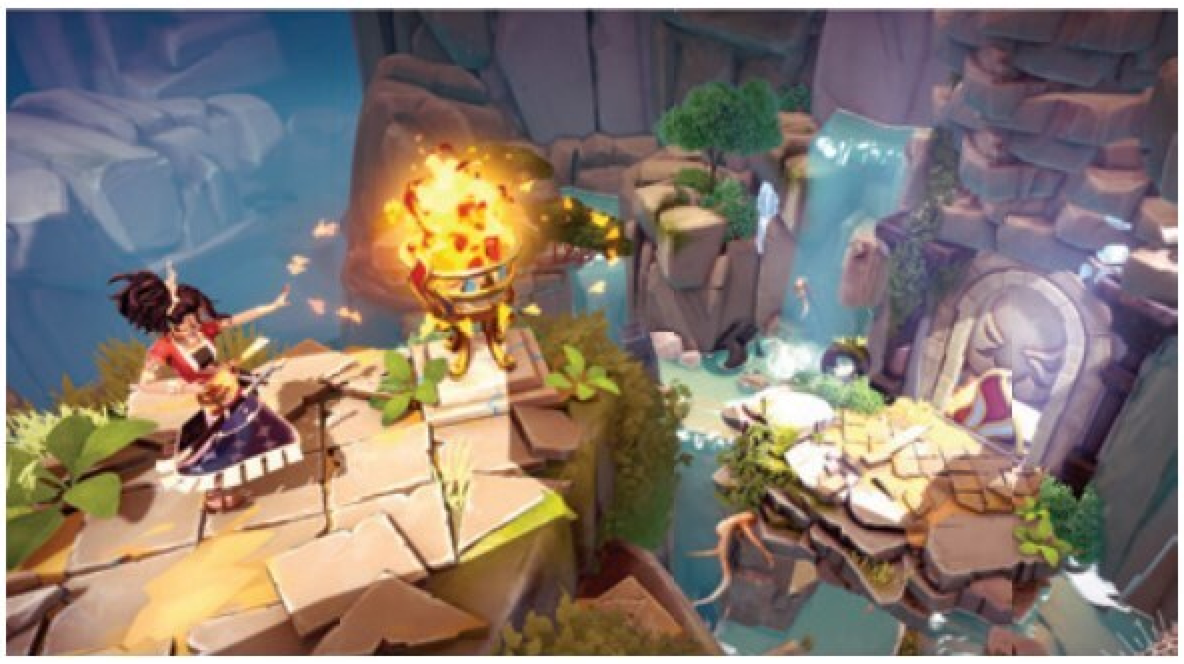
2XKO

We finally got our hands on 2XKO, the long-anticipated tag-team fighting game set in the League of Legends universe. The game's appearance is akin to more complex 2D fighters like Guilty Gear, but thanks to simplified controls that allow for single-button specials and ultimates, as well as team-based attacks, the gameplay might be more comparable to Street Fighter 6's Modern Controls. Despite the easy-to-learn gameplay, I relished in learning complex and drawn-out combos then unleashing them on my opponents. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Fighting (Online TBA) **PUBLISHER** Riot Games **DEVELOPER** Riot Games **RELEASE** 2025

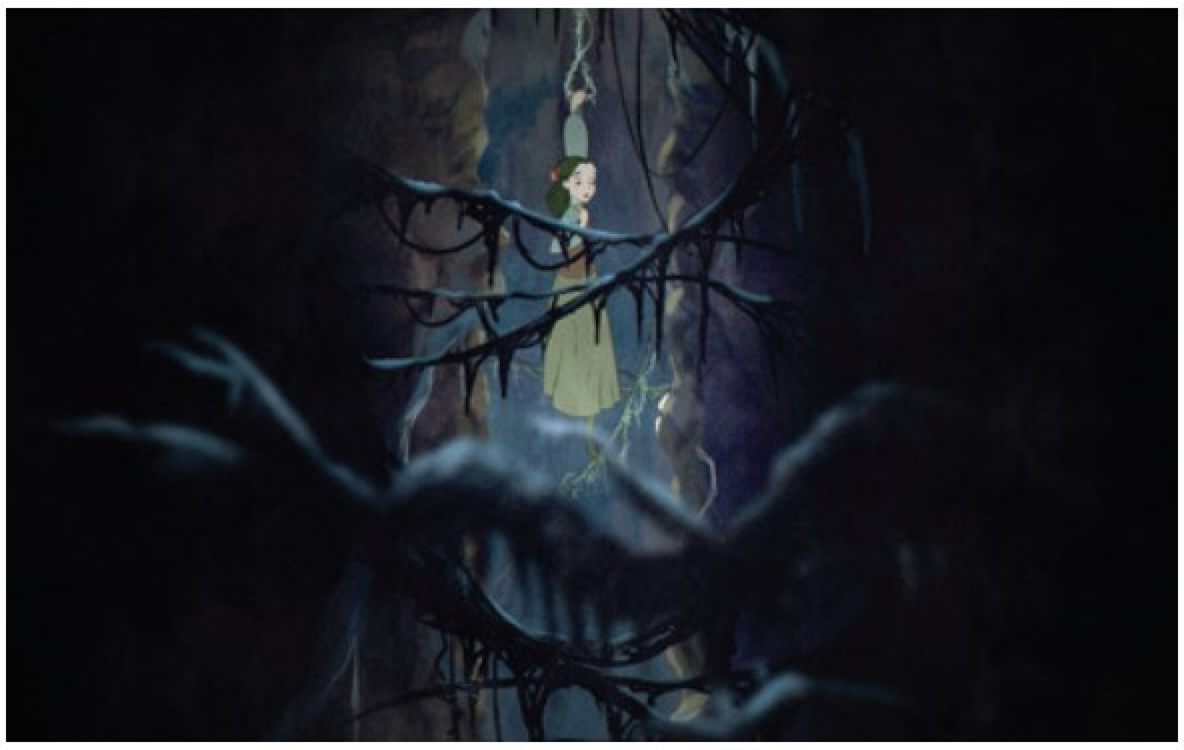
ALZARA: RADIANT ECHOES

Alzara is a new RPG on the way from a young French studio that has found success on Kickstarter. It's a vibrant, colorful RPG, and speaking with the co-founder and creative director Emma Delage, I was impressed by the games the team is seeking to emulate. Specifically, games like Final Fantasy X, Lost Odyssey, and a personal favorite, Golden Sun. Throwing back to the past era of RPGs is a popular trend right now, but it's one I am happy to embrace. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**



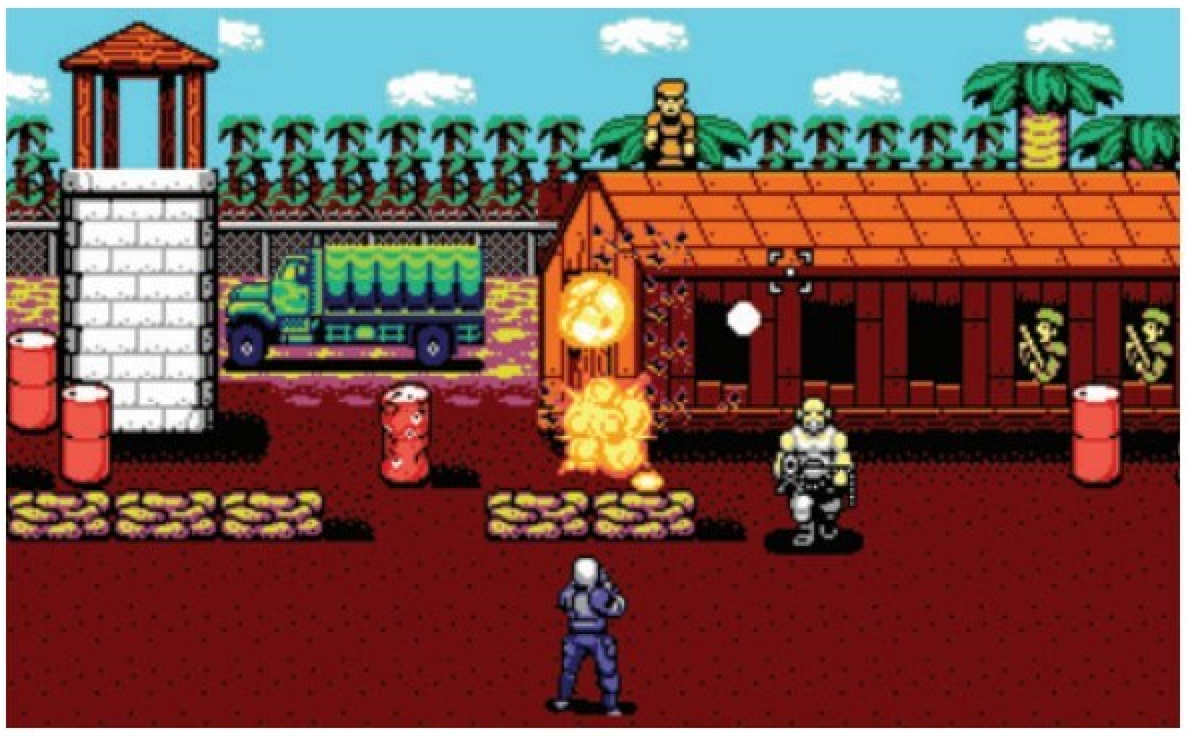
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Studio Camelia **DEVELOPER** Studio Camelia **RELEASE** TBD

BYE SWEET CAROLE



Bye Sweet Carole's art direction is inspired by classic animated films (namely Disney's) but with a distinctly sinister edge. Set in early 1900s England, protagonist Lana Benton searches a dangerous orphanage for her missing friend. She soon finds herself torn between reality and a fantastical kingdom as she must survive a litany of disturbing foes. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Maximum Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Little Sewing Machine, Meangrip Studios **RELEASE** 2024



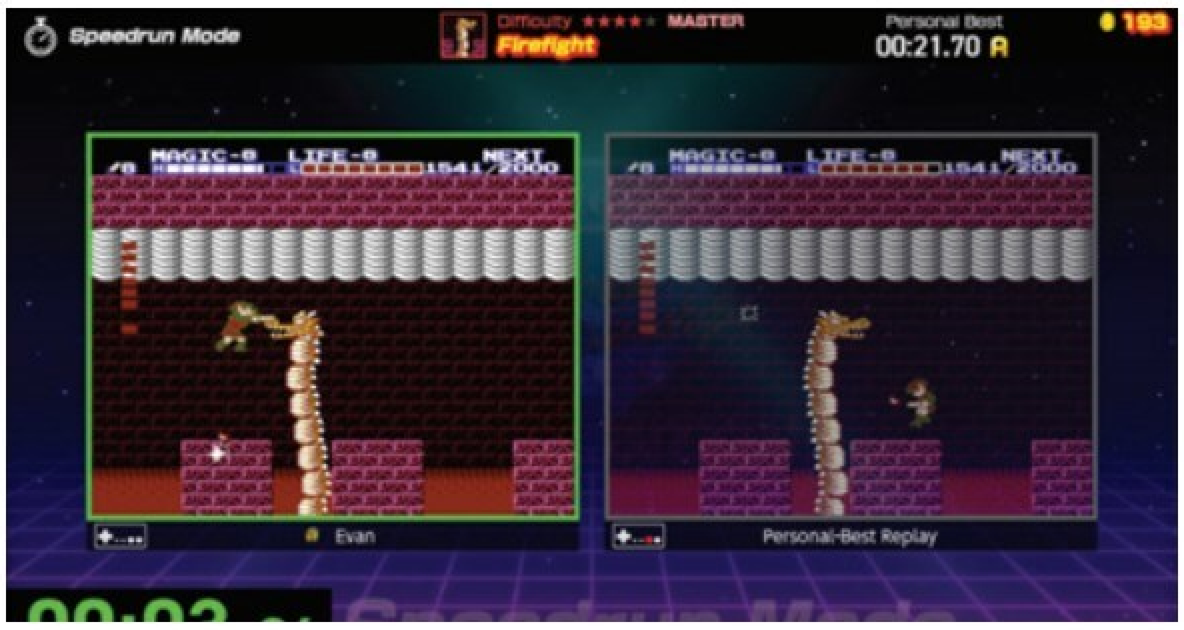
UFO50

Made by the creator of Spelunky (and some of his friends), UFO50 is a staggeringly ambitious project. It tells the story of a fictional developer called UFO Soft that created a console that existed from 1982 to 1990. Players can play through the console's entire 50-game library in chronological order, seeing the progression of its technology over time. Revealed back in 2017, the game will finally see the light of day this September. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Compilation **PUBLISHER** Mossmouth
DEVELOPER Mossmouth **RELEASE** September 18

NINTENDO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS: NES EDITION

Recalling the heyday of live NES competitions of the '80s, Nintendo World Championships organizes more than 100 speed-run tests from 13 classic NES games. You might have to see how fast you can collect a mushroom in Super Mario Bros., sprint to a door in Metroid, or eat an enemy quickly in Kirby. There will be online leaderboards and all kinds of unlockable additional modes and challenges. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**



PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 8-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Nintendo **RELEASE** July 18

GEARS OF WAR: E-DAY

Set 14 years before the first Gears of War game, Gears of War: E-Day brings back Marcus Fenix and Dom Santiago as players experience their first bout with the infamous Locust Horde enemy. E-Day seemingly takes place on Emergence Day, which is when the Locust Horde first erupted from beneath humanity, and it's being developed from the ground up in Unreal Engine 5. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** Shooter/Action
(Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER The Coalition **RELEASE** TBA

BALLAD OF ANTARA

Ballad of Antara is a gorgeous action RPG that sees players traveling with a mysterious young girl with the power to restore a devastated world. Whether alone or with up to two other players in multiplayer, the game's slick combat and stunning art direction are impressive, especially since it's a free-to-play game also slated for mobile platforms. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC • iOS • Android
STYLE 1 to 3-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Infold Games **DEVELOPER** Tipworks
RELEASE 2025

COZY GROVE: CAMP SPIRIT

Cozy Grove, the 2021 life-sim about managing an island haunted by friendly ghosts, is getting a sequel. With more ghosts to befriend, a new island to explore, and daily quests to tackle, your customizable Spirit Scouts will have plenty of new tasks to complete. The sequel will also allow you to adopt pets, including pettable dogs and for some reason, snails. **BY CHARLES HARTE** ■

PLATFORM iOS • Android
STYLE 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Netflix
DEVELOPER Spry Fox **RELEASE** June 25

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For more information on our scoring system, visit GameInformer.com/Scoring
To read all of our reviews, visit GameInformer.com/Reviews

GI MUST PLAY

SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

Conquering old demons

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice didn't need a sequel. It had a clear story to tell, and it told it well with an artful (and tactful) execution of its mental health themes and a strong conclusion. But Senua's Saga: Hellblade II builds a great case for itself by using the titular warrior's growth to help not only herself but, for the first time, others around her, shining her in a fascinating new light. Refined gameplay and a jaw-dropping presentation make for a more wholly satisfying sophomore outing.

Since the first game's conclusion, Senua has grown older, wiser, and more confident in herself. Although the psychosis-induced voices in her head still pepper her every thought (headphones are highly recommended due to the fantastic and effective 3D audio), she's largely embraced and accepted them. This time, the voices factor less directly into gameplay and are largely used as an effective storytelling flourish: audible manifestations of her innermost thoughts and anxieties.

Senua's journey takes her to a new land to put an end to the slavers that ravaged her homeland. As that story evolves into something far grander and fantastical, I enjoyed the new emphasis on companionship. Melina Jurgens delivers another phenomenal performance as Senua, and an equally impressive supporting cast backs her. Seeing Senua interact and travel with a small cast of likable and interesting allies and use the lessons learned from her struggles to help them overcome their own darkness is rewarding. Watching Senua combat old demons as they rear their heads again is also a realistic and refreshing portrayal of the constant battle of mental health; her triumph in the first game wasn't, and shouldn't be, a one-time victory.

However, now that Senua has companions to banter with, the voices she hears have an unfortunate habit of speaking up over crucial dialogue. From an artistic standpoint, and I say this as someone who has never experienced psychosis, trying to tune them out to concentrate on a conversation helped me empathize with Senua's day-to-day experience. But as a game, the voices' constant chatter did prove a genuine hindrance when I wanted to listen to someone else.

The intimate one-on-one combat encounters remain largely the same but with a dazzling visual and cinematic upgrade, minus some old annoyances. Enemies no longer blindside you from off-screen, meaning the action stays in front of you at all times. Sword duels remain a repetitive but entertaining dance of dodging powerful swings and nailing satisfying parries to fill a time-slowing focus meter that, once unleashed, allows Senua to briefly execute an unimpeded assault. Ninja Theory thankfully axed the first game's creeping permadeath penalty, so dying here has no consequence, and you're quickly thrown back into the action.

Taking down threats leads to seamless and varied transitions to the next foe, making fights feel like an interactive cinematic in the most complimentary way. This is just a microcosm of the game's incredible production values; Hellblade II is arguably the most beautiful game I've ever played. From fantastic, subtle facial animations to the superb lighting of its idyllic landscapes and the nightmarish depictions of Norse deities, Hellblade II is one of the few titles that truly looks next-gen. Best of all, the creative artistic touches of the first game remain intact and dialed to eleven, with mind-bending kaleidoscopic effects and dreamlike lighting and visuals. Hellblade II isn't just technically impressive; it's genuinely alluring to stare at as an art piece.

Exploring this stunning world is also more fun, thanks to the increased puzzle variety. The perspective-based "spot the sigil in the environment" riddles, which were enjoyable but overused in the last game, are dramatically reduced in number and spread more evenly throughout the adventure. Other challenges, such as solving illumination puzzles to navigate a dark, terror-filled cave or building paths using world-shifting magic, are adequately entertaining and make for a more well-rounded journey.

Senua's Saga: Hellblade II's conclusion ends on another strong note, and despite my initial reservations about continuing Senua's story, I walked away happy to see her conquer new monsters, both literal and metaphorical. I'm pleased Ninja Theory avoided the temptation to blow up this formula into something far bigger than needed. This isn't Xbox's God of War; it's a better Hellblade, retaining the series' thoughtful storytelling and artistry few triple-A games possess. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

9

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Ninja Theory **RELEASE** May 21 **RATING** M

XDEFIANT

Defying no tradition

XDefiant's core modes offer temporarily fun stabs at the competitive multiplayer arena shooter, but Ubisoft's latest attempt at carving out a slice of the lucrative esports pie feels half-baked. Core modes like its practice mode and ranked queue are gated off by construction tape at the time of writing. This leaves a bland battle pass with head-scratching progression decisions and standard weapon-based leveling systems as the only tangible means of rewarding you for playing the game or doing well beyond an individual match. And with questionable netcode and missing mainstay features and modes, not even its interesting hero shooter-like abilities and small tweaks on the run-and-gun, low-time-to-kill formula coined by Call of Duty make me want to return to XDefiant.

Ubisoft's crossover shooter couldn't have picked less interesting properties to kit-bash together. Though each of the five factions currently available in the game adds a cool approach to gameplay, they're not exactly the superstars you think of when you hear Ubisoft. Instead, players step into the arenas as unfamiliar characters from Ded Sec (Watch Dogs), The Cleaners (The Division), Libertad (Far Cry), Echelon (Splinter Cell), or The Phantoms (Ghost Recon); there's no Sam Fisher or Dani Rojas for you to recognize or get excited about picking because you liked their game. Each faction has three playable characters (two or more of which you need to unlock in each faction) but they have no differentiating traits between them aside from some cosmetic stuff.

Combat is fast-paced, with a quick time-to-kill to make each shot count and almost nonexistent respawn timers constantly pushing you back out of the gate to chase down the objective and juice up that K/D ratio with its hyper-realistic arsenal of guns and devices. The standout here is XDefiant's selection of 14 maps, each boasting plenty of cleverly laid out lanes and chokepoints, with open areas and tight corridors in different spots to encourage and reward different playstyles.

Getting enough kills in one life unlocks a cool ultra ability to help your team out in battle and stack up some extra kills or extra time on the objective. Here's where things start to change from the familiar: Ultras, alongside a less powerful but still useful secondary ability and a helpful passive, vary based on the faction you choose. Each faction is based on an organization or group from another Ubisoft property and has its own set of specialties and abilities. You can switch between them anytime during a game, letting you adjust your strategy based on the task at hand.

Let's say you're playing Domination, but the other team has a sniper in a perfect sightline to pick you and your teammates off one by one, keeping you from capturing the point. Setting up one of the Phantoms' Mag Barriers might help absorb some sniper fire long enough for your team to grab a reliable foothold and return fire. But as tactical as these abilities can be, XDefiant's basic setup doesn't do enough to encourage strategic play over simply rushing the objective and trying to beat the enemy team to the draw until the score limit is reached.

That game of quickdraw doesn't always feel right, though. XDefiant's netcode and hit detection are way off; I can't tell you how many times my game has registered a shot on an opposing player as a hit, only for them to kill me and the game to tell me that they had full health after I'd been downed. Even with a wired connection and the best ping in my lobby, I've been shot through walls as I move and even been killed while hiding behind cover that should block my entire body.

As of this writing, it's barely been a week since I first installed XDefiant, but I don't think I'd miss it from my hard drive. While the gameplay at its core is fun enough, the game is barren compared to most other shooters–including the free ones–with even bare-basic modes like team deathmatch and free-for-all or features like a ping system or skill-based matchmaking nowhere to be found. Its maps are well-made, sure, but with no rank to strive for, daily missions that ask me to commit to playing ten whole matches, and very little to look forward to in the battle pass, I don't understand why this game would gain any traction over others beyond the fact that it's free.

BY CHARLIE WACHOLZ

6

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 12-Player Online Shooter **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft San Francisco **RELEASE** May 21 **RATING** T

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PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

Back and forward

The Mario brand of RPG represents some of my favorite adventures in the genre. The comedic tone, inviting art, and active battle systems have always been highlights for me, but Thousand-Year Door was a personal blind spot. I played prior and subsequent Mario RPGs, but I skipped it when the original was released in 2004, and notably was not yet employed at *Game Informer* at the time. With Nintendo remastering the acclaimed RPG for Switch, I welcomed the excuse to finally play it. I am impressed by how improved the visuals and music are two decades later, and found that, for the most part, the comedy holds up. I now fully appreciate and understand Thousand-Year Door's reputation as a classic, but it is not without its 20-year-old headaches. It arguably presents the first signs that the series would be less interested in being an RPG in the coming years and would ultimately suffer as a result.

Thousand-Year Door has always been an attractive game. Nintendo is practiced at prioritizing evergreen art styles over fidelity, and Paper Mario is a poster child of that approach. Lighting effects are the primary improvement for the Switch version, and they make a huge difference – the game looks fantastic and modern throughout. Beyond the look of the game, a number of small changes (like faster partner switching and shortcut keys) help smooth out the experience and just generally remove annoying hurdles. Combat also remains enjoyable without much need for modernization. I am a sucker for timed-button pressing in any RPG, and I welcome it here, but I was surprised to see that the execution prompts exist throughout the whole game.

Over time, the Mario RPG series has wavered between being an adventure game and an RPG, and it is here that the Paper branch of the tree started growing more in the adventure direction. Subsequent games, like 2020's The Origami King, completely drop leveling mechanics, which is a mistake. I love having a sense of progression, and enjoyed it here even if I felt like I was going back in time to see its final hurrah.

Where the adventure game mechanics work is in the game's worlds and characters. It is a breath of fresh air to see wholly new characters in a Mario game, especially on the occasions when they feel out of place with the Mario aesthetic. I looked forward to seeing every new location and weirdo that lived there and was never disappointed.

But further on that desire to be as much an adventure game as an RPG that Paper Mario has always struggled to reconcile, Thousand-Year Door has too much backtracking. Nearly every location in the game involves going to the end of an area to acquire an item, taking it back to someone, and then going back to where you were and redoing every fight on the way. With limited options for fast travel, the process was often tedious.

The sequences where you are not playing as Mario are similarly unexciting. Peach has fun dialogue with an AI struggling to understand emotions and enjoyable puzzles to solve, but if Bowser had been entirely excised from the game, I don't think I would have noticed or cared. His minor payoff at the end was not worth checking in with him between every chapter.

For all the annoyances of repeating areas and slow (but engaging) combat, Thousand-Year Door is now a series highlight. It marks the first instance of where I didn't want a Mario RPG to go (I generally prefer the Mario & Luigi direction), but the constant fourth-wall breaking, myriad colorful and unique characters, and its willingness to just be weird all lead to a joyful journey. I am grateful that this shined-up version of the GameCube classic I missed is finally available on a contemporary platform.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

8.25

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Intelligent Systems **RELEASE** May 23 **RATING** E

CROW COUNTRY

Comfort food horror

The Resident Evil series has redefined and refined survival horror in recent years, arguably single-handedly. However, as the venerable series continues to push the genre forward, a growing number of indie games are looking back to survival horror's late '90s heyday for inspiration. Crow Country joins those ranks, offering a respectable nostalgic homage to the past. Veterans won't encounter anything they haven't seen, but the experience is comforting in its spooky familiarity.

Developer SFB Games clearly understood its self-imposed assignment. Crow Country's grainy, low-polygonal presentation faithfully evokes the PS1/N64 era while still establishing a unique charm, thanks to its doll-esque character designs. Thankfully, the studio stops short of replicating more archaic elements like the static camera angles of the time, opting for a much preferred 360-degree camera and free movement instead of tank controls. The presentation adds a nostalgic sinisterness to the game's setting, a derelict amusement park called Crow Country.

As agent Mara Forest, you arrive in search of the park's missing owner, Edward Crow, and quickly find it overrun by grotesque monsters of an unknown origin. Despite the game's eerie vibes, scaredy cats shouldn't fret; Crow Country isn't anywhere near as terrifying as its Silent Hill/Resident Evil influences. That may be disappointing to horror aficionados – I count myself among them – but I didn't mind. Outside of a few decent jump scares, the game is more about establishing an effective mood, and that's enough for me. The creatures look appropriately gross and unsettling despite having a strange cutesy charm due to the art direction. The writing has a good sense of humor that contrasts nicely with an otherwise dark and generally enjoyable mystery highlighted by a cool story twist.

Blasting monsters with various firearms, such as a pistol and shotgun, feels adequate, and attachable laser sights add a contemporary assist. Evading enemies to conserve ammo is relatively easy, and the game is generous about keeping your clips full. This speaks to Crow Country's wide approachability. It's not challenging in regards to combat and inventory management, making it a great introduction to the genre for newcomers or a good option for those wanting a lighter take on a typically tough gameplay style.

SFB Games also commits to Crow Country's old-school approach to exploration and puzzle-solving. The game's elaborate puzzles are generally clever and well-designed, but the real challenge is keeping track of over two dozen notes containing hints or solutions. That's because you can only view these messages in save rooms, creating a lot of backtracking to double-check clues. To mitigate this, expect to jot down notes or take photos of clues with your phone.

Additionally, intentionally cluttered environments easily hide useful items and clues, meaning it's easy to miss things. Expect to hug the walls of every room to thoroughly comb them of their interactable elements (though the game does track how many secrets you find). The game's lack of autosaves means dying results in losing progress between your last save room visit. Diligent saving minimizes such heartbreak, but some may find it too old-school for their tastes.

As reductive as it sounds, when it comes to delivering a classic survival horror experience, Crow Country is a good "one of those." Familiar elements and tropes are well executed, and the succinct runtime of five to six hours is perfect for its smaller scope. I had fun reliving the genre's golden years through Crow Country's eyes; playing it feels like relaxing under a warm, blood-stained blanket. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

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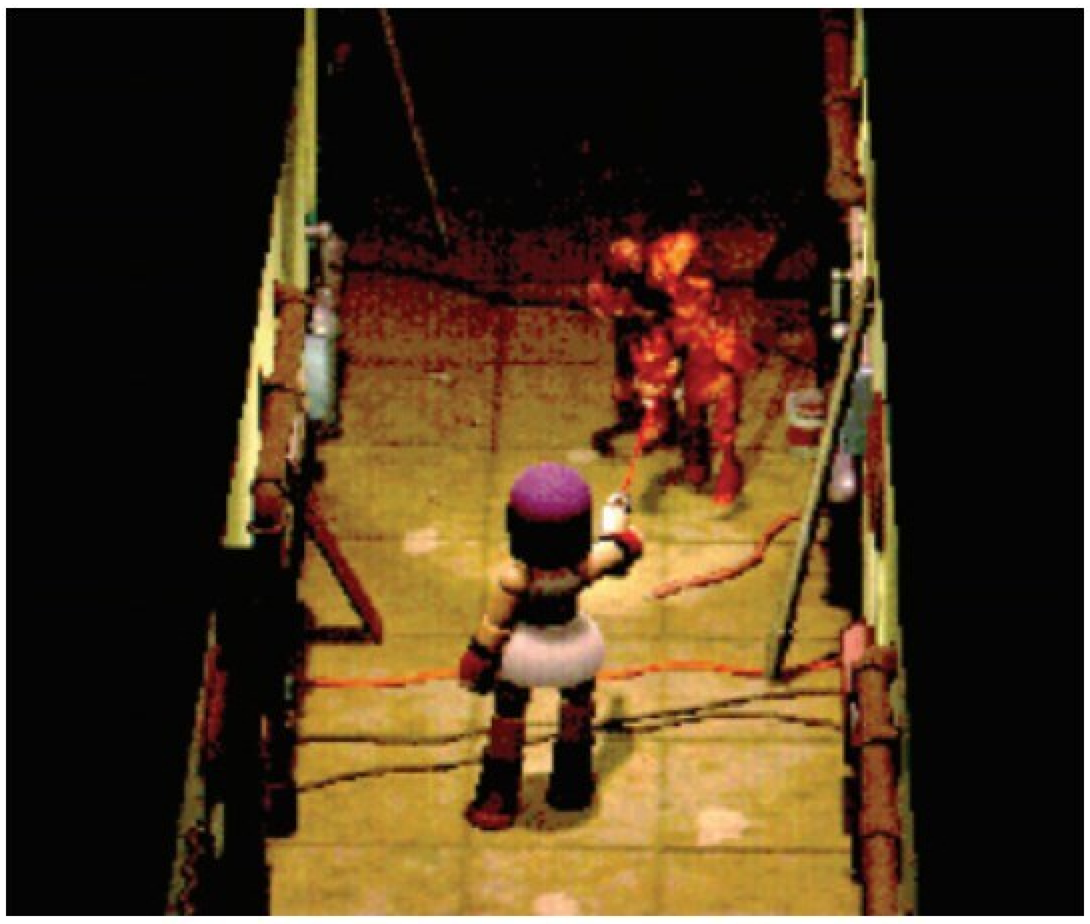
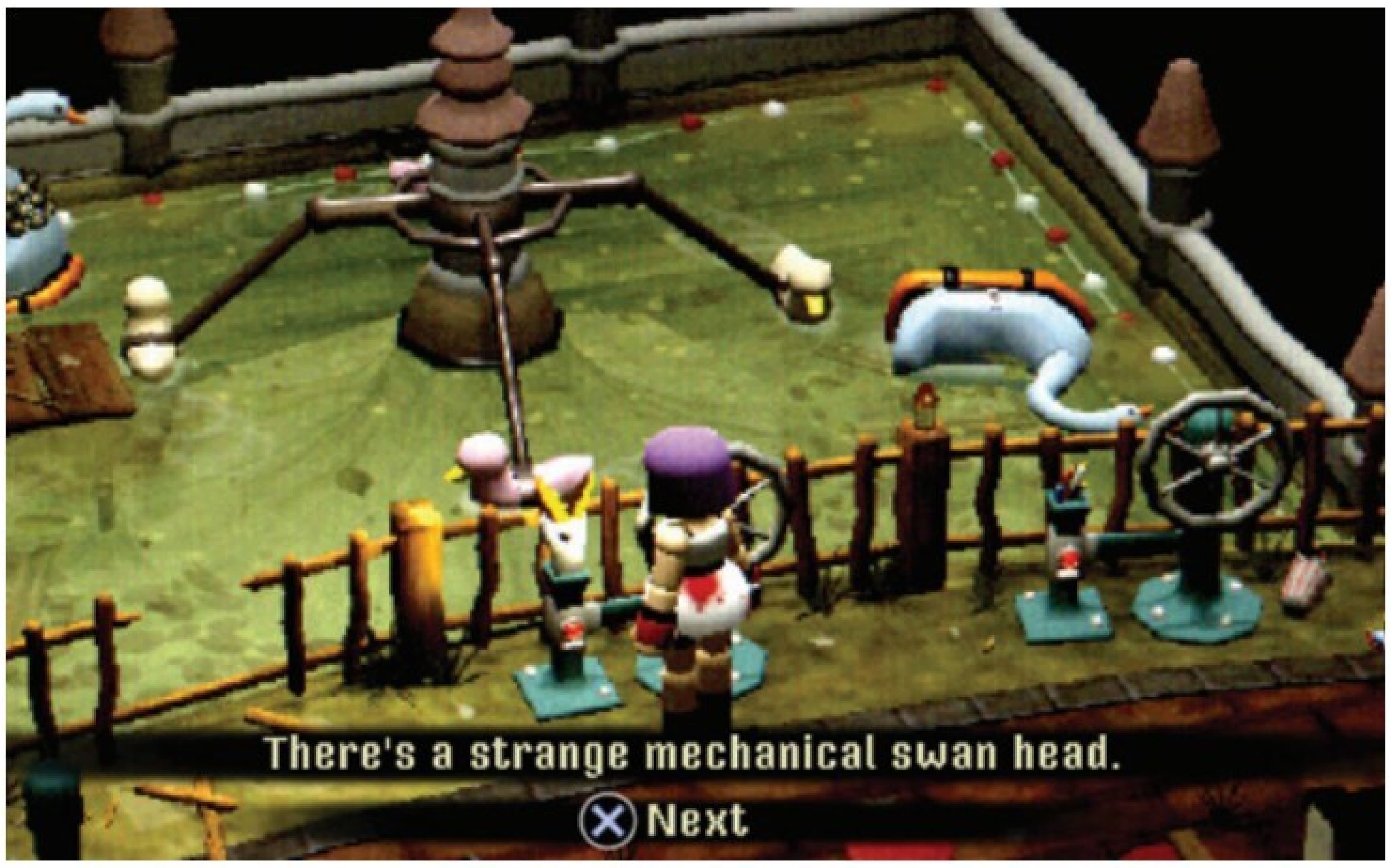
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** SFB Games **DEVELOPER** SFB Games **RELEASE** May 9 **RATING** T





There's a strange mechanical swan head.

WITH MY PAST

Are you sure of this choice? Take your time, you'd better think about it carefully...

With My Past is a short but powerful burst of emotional storytelling on top of excellent and intuitive puzzle design. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

9

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle/Platforming
PUBLISHER Edigger **DEVELOPER** Imagine Wings Studio
RELEASE May 7 **RATING** NR

MINISHOOT' ADVENTURES

Minishoot' Adventures bridges the gaps between disparate genres with outstanding gameplay and thoughtful level design to deliver one of the best games I've played all year. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

9.25

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER SoulGame Studio, IndieArk
DEVELOPER SoulGame Studio
RELEASE April 2 **RATING** NR

PLEASE FIX THE ROAD

It delivers a tight, curated puzzle-solving experience that hooks you from the very first puzzle and, through steadily evolving mechanics, delivers satisfaction around every turn. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4
Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle
PUBLISHER Arielek **DEVELOPER** Arielek
RELEASE May 15 (Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One),
May 16 (PS5, PS4, Switch), 2022 (PC)
RATING E

LORELEI AND THE LASER EYES

Couple Lorelei and the Laser Eyes' ability to make you feel smart with a mystery worth unraveling, fourth-wall-breaking commentary, and unexpected reality-bending moments sending you to bizarre places, and you are left with a fantastic puzzle game that I already wish I could play again for the first time. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

8.75

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle
PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER Simogo **RELEASE** May 16 **RATING** T

KILLER KLOWNS FROM OUTER SPACE: THE GAME

The gameplay mechanics that help balance the competitive roles reinforce the lessons IllFonic has learned over the years, while its comical nods to the film and impressive graphics showcase the respect given to the source material. **BY KENNETH SEWARD JR.**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 10-Player Online Action
PUBLISHER IllFonic **DEVELOPER** IllFonic,
Teravision Games **RELEASE** June 4 **RATING** M

INDIKA

Indika is one of the year's most affecting and memorable adventures, and its themes will stick with me as I continue to ponder their meanings. **BY MARCUS STEWART** ■

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** 11 Bit Studios
DEVELOPER Odd Meter **RELEASE** May 2 (PC),
May 17 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S) **RATING** M

L2
R1
L1
X
LOCK
L3
R2
R3

MAKING XBOX & PLAYSTATION ACCESSIBLE

We spoke with Sony and Microsoft about the development process and history of its Adaptive and Access controllers

BY GRANT STONER

THE DISABLED EXPERIENCE is incredibly individualistic. As such, the options for improving accessibility are expansive to account for as many disabilities as possible. For disabled players to properly interact with the gaming industry, they require appropriate options, design practices, and hardware. Without these tools, modern titles and current systems are all but inaccessible.

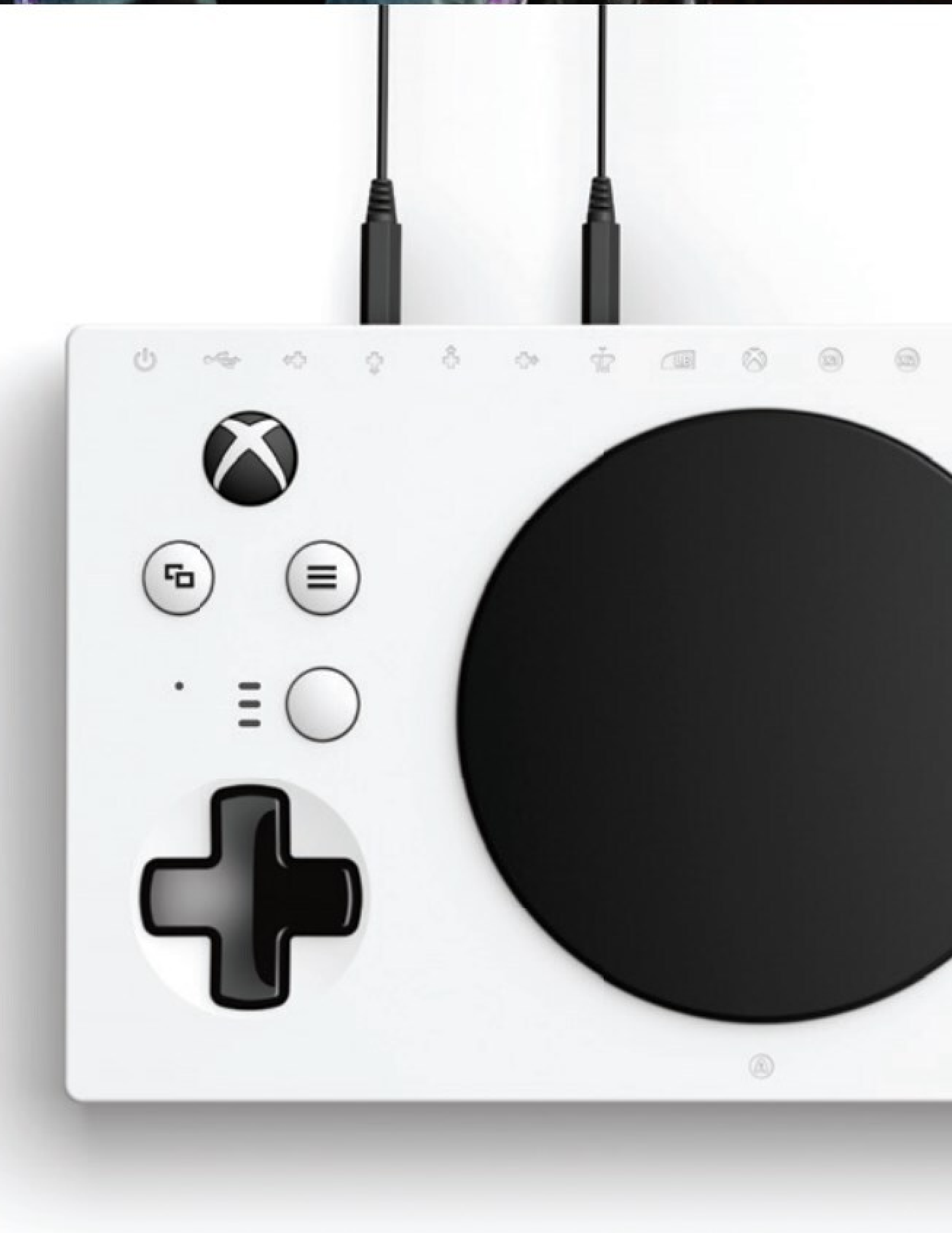
Despite innovation in games like The Last of Us Part 2, Forza Motorsport (2023), God of War Ragnarök, and Dead Space (2023), these award-winning games are still inaccessible – not due to a lack of features and inclusive designs, but rather because of hardware limitations. As studios continue to create new ways for individuals to experience these titles, some disabled players extensively rely on specialized equipment to even play. Enter the Xbox Adaptive Controller and Access Controller developed by PlayStation. These pieces of hardware allow players to create their own custom setups with specific buttons, sticks, and switches, offering far more choice than standard console controllers. For Xbox and PlayStation, these devices are the culmination of years of research, engineering, and a commitment to support the disabled community.

XBOX ADAPTATION BEYOND GAMES

On September 4, 2018, Microsoft released the Xbox Adaptive Controller, a fully customizable hub with 19 3.5mm ports matching every button on a standard controller, as well as two USB 2.0 ports for joysticks. Combined with software allowing individuals to designate what each button does regardless of placement, disabled players can create unique setups without the assistance of organizations, designers, or tech-savvy creators.

We spoke with the co-inventor of the Xbox Adaptive Controller, Bryce Johnson and senior accessibility project manager at Xbox, Dr. Kaitlyn Jones, about the conception of the accessible hub, noting it was something Microsoft was always interested in, but never able to achieve until the right ideas formed.

“We were working on accessibility in general at Xbox – narrators, magnifiers, things like that,” Johnson says. “We knew there were challenges with the [Xbox] controller, but I think the catalyst was really a guy named Matt Hite. He was already doing work with Warfighter Engaged, and really wanted to try to build something. He first started looking at how Kinect could be used to empower limb-different veterans.” Warfighter Engaged is a charity organization dedicated to improving the lives of injured and disabled veterans by creating custom video game controllers and other recreational items.



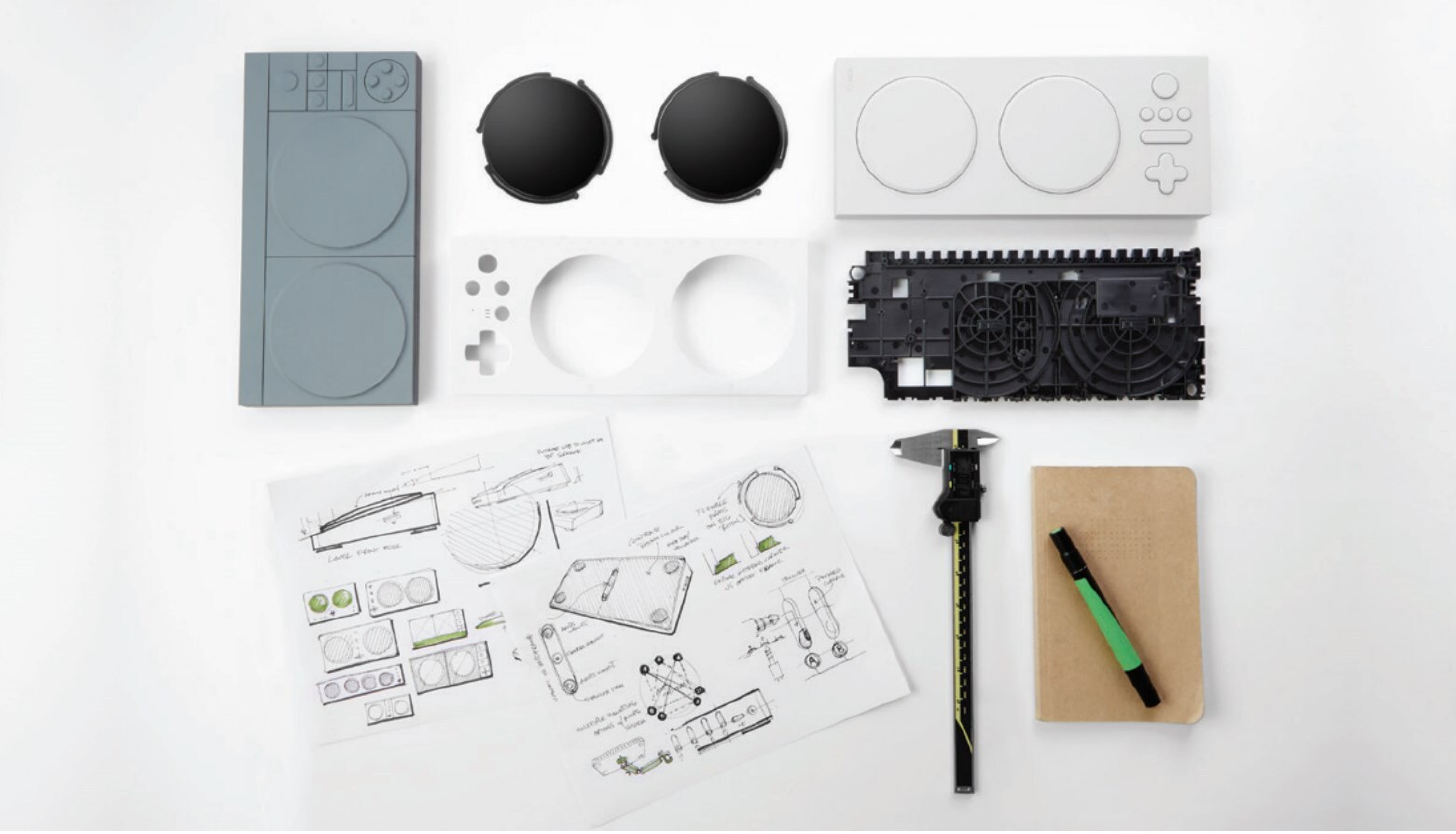
Johnson, as well as Xbox as a whole, were already familiar with organizations like SpecialEffect and AbleGamers, groups that provide disabled individuals with accessible hardware, and they were already advocates for accessibility across the industry. Yet, the idea of a first-party, Xbox-branded piece of accessible hardware was a relatively new concept. In the summer of 2015, Microsoft hosted its first Hackathon, an event that encourages others to design and create products based on specific themes, with the inaugural year being controllers. Along with Hite and others, Johnson developed the idea for the first iteration of the Xbox Adaptive Controller.

“We worked over the year, from 2015 to 2016, on refining the idea that eventually became the Adaptive Controller,” Johnson says. “We got three interns assigned to basically help us refine the prototype. We worked on those prototypes, and Warfighter Engaged was with us the whole time.”

For approximately 18 months, the team continuously crafted suitable controllers before finally landing on a device they could pitch to leadership. Despite spending countless hours creating a hub that would ultimately benefit disabled individuals, it was still a Microsoft product that needed executive approval. However, Johnson notes the team neglected to follow traditional rules, instead continuing the development process prior to an official acceptance. Outside organizations were brought in to work on a product that could be canceled at any moment, but the necessity for an accessible controller was worth the risk.

“The one thing that was extremely unusual, but at the same time one hundred percent vital, was that beyond Warfighter Engaged, we started to bring in other charities to work with us,” Johnson says. “This is unheard of in hardware development. We do not bring in external people before an idea is even greenlit, but we had to for this project. So, we brought in AbleGamers and SpecialEffect, and we brought in the Cerebral Palsy Foundation, and we brought in Craig Hospital.”

These organizations and institutions specialize in aiding disabled players and were aware of each other’s work and impact throughout the disabled community. This familiarity was crucial to the continuous development of the Xbox Adaptive Controller. And as Johnson acknowledges, other departments within Microsoft are often unaware of products under development, meaning outside assistance was a requirement. During this initial period, first-party accessible hardware was still in its infancy. Even though Nintendo developed a controller specific for quadriplegics in the 1980s, it was a rarity for a first-party team to recognize the disabled community through



hardware innovations. Johnson wanted to ensure the Xbox Adaptive Controller would impress leadership through its advanced development even before pitching.

"We knew that this was needed," Johnson says. "We knew how important this was and how life-changing it was going to be, but we weren't going 'Oh, we're the first.' Quite honestly, we had very real concerns that we might be the last. There are certain leaps that we make because we're not sure if we we're going to get the opportunity to do more. At the time, we were like, 'Hey, we have to go big because this could be our only shot.'"

This energy and enthusiasm were crucial for the overall development and the eventual release of the Xbox Adaptive Controller. Johnson explains several moments throughout the creation process where the team had a legitimate fear of cancellation. To coincide with these concerns, the controller was in development alongside the architecting stages of the Xbox Series X, bypassing Xbox leadership's hesitancy to approve a device that would most likely release at the end of a console's lifecycle.

Beyond these fears, the overall development of the Xbox Adaptive Controller faced a tremendous obstacle in its final shape. No disabled individual uses hardware the same way, meaning designers and engineers were forced to determine what buttons, ports, and features were included. As Jones notes, hardware is, by design, far less customizable than software.

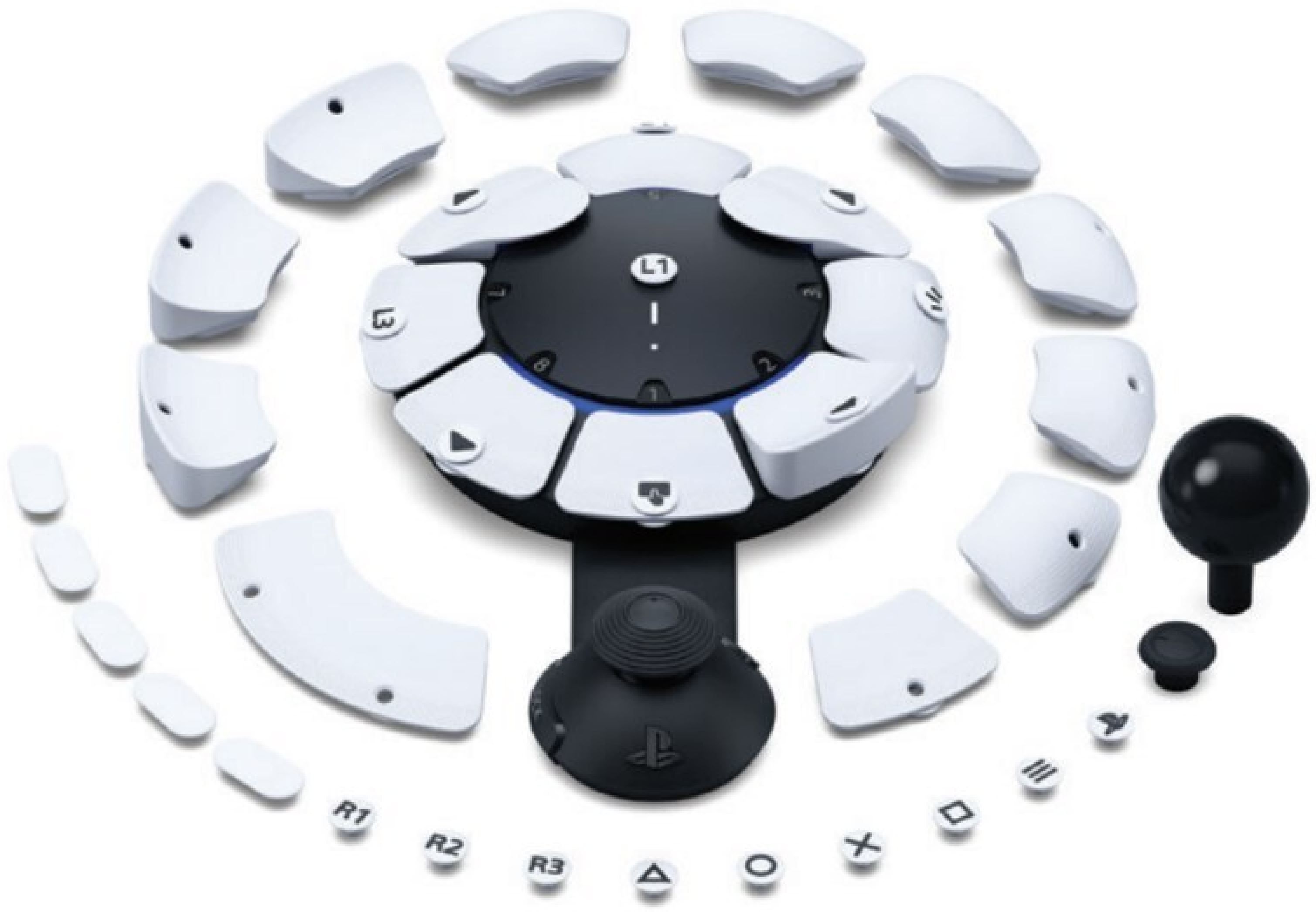
"Hardware is so different from software in that you are forced to make choices," Jones says. "'Is the button this big or that big?' Are there this many ports or that many ports?' There is no flexibility. With software, you can provide multiple options and give people the choice to tailor their experience to their needs."

Throughout the entire process of development, Johnson consistently had to convince leadership why they should care about this controller. And when the device was finally ready to be revealed, he noted he was worried about perception. Would the public understand its purpose? Would the public, especially disabled individuals, be receptive to an accessible device developed by Microsoft? Yet, as Jones notes, the community reveled in the announcement. No longer were accessible devices limited to organizations or creators. The public could finally customize hardware accessibility to their specific needs.

"From an outside perspective – and I assume a lot of charities and nonprofits also felt like this – we were all just so thrilled that we felt like our needs were finally being met," Jones says. "A lot of the engineering, and one-off soldering, and cracking open controllers was no longer going to be this huge barrier that was taking up so much of our time. Rather, [the Xbox Adaptive Controller] was out there, it's supported by this major first-party company like Xbox, and it's going to help us all with our mission moving forward."

BRYCE JOHNSON
Co-inventor of the Xbox Adaptive Controller

DR. KAITLYN JONES
Senior accessibility project manager



ACCESSING PLAYSTATION HARDWARE ACCESSIBILITY

PlayStation's commitment to accessibility was evident as far back as 2016 with Uncharted 4: A Thief's End. Since its release, studios like Insomniac Games, Santa Monica Studios, and Naughty Dog have all won numerous awards for their dedication to disabled individuals. Dozens of options and inclusive design practices are actively embedded into each PlayStation game. Yet, hardware accessibility is a relatively new venture.

On December 6, 2023, PlayStation released the Access Controller, a device with nine primary buttons, 19 button caps, three joystick styles, four 3.5mm AUX ports, and a bevy of software features allowing players to customize the inputs and their subsequent functions. Sony Interactive Entertainment director of product operations John Zarganis explains that the Access Controller was designed to bridge the gap between accessible software and inaccessible hardware.

"We knew that many gamers with disabilities found it challenging to use standard controllers," Zarganis says. "At the time, if you were a player with motor skill challenges and wanted an accessible gaming experience, you often had to invest in numerous extra accessories because there wasn't a readily available 'out of the box' solution. So, we teamed up with some wonderful accessibility organizations and set out to develop a highly configurable controller that can address many of the key obstacles players with disabilities face."

Conceptualization for the Access Controller began in 2018. Zarganis notes the entire project took approximately five years, requiring both internal and external assistance. From the outside, PlayStation relied on numerous accessibility organizations and consultants to provide feedback throughout the process and guidance into a relatively unknown area of development. Software accessibility was handled at the studio level, and with each release, developers could learn from one another regarding the implementation of specific accessibility features. Yet, PlayStation needed the resources that outside sources have compiled over the years.

"Starting this project was definitely a mix of excitement and challenge for us," Zarganis says. "We understood that the range of accessibility needs is broad and there is no 'one size fits all' solution. We had so much to learn, and figuring out the best design approach and refining the product was a long journey. Thankfully, our partners at accessibility organizations like AbleGamers, Stack-Up, and SpecialEffect were incredibly supportive. They provided us with invaluable feedback every step of the way."

Internally, Zarganis explains that Access Controller researchers and developers worked with several award-winning PlayStation Studios because of their extensive knowledge with accessibility and the disabled community. Even though they primarily created software, the understanding of how disabled players interact with games and the features and designs they regularly request impacted the overall design and functionality of the Access Controller. Physically disabled players needed an accessible piece of hardware, but it would only work if it was compatible with PlayStation games.

"We worked with an array of game studios, including Santa Monica Studio, Insomniac Games, Naughty Dog, Bend Studio, Media Molecule, Guerrilla, and others," Zarganis says. "All the teams provided very useful feedback in terms of features they wanted to see included. Finding the right balance and consistency between console and controller interoperability, as well as game-specific configurations, presented a significant challenge. It was one we could only surmount effectively with the invaluable support provided by the studios. Input from game developers with disabilities, such as Insomniac Games' Sam Schaffel, were particularly insightful."

Yet, the development was not without its challenges. Aside from the engineering and design aspects, the pandemic impacted how PlayStation utilized user researchers. As the world shut down, PlayStation was unable to invite others to test the device. Needing to ship confidential tech across the world without leaks was nerve-racking, but Zarganis notes pride for the team during this period.

"Initially, we weren't sure if this was possible," Zarganis says. "The challenge of delivering the necessary equipment to playtesters to keep testing our prototypes was daunting, but it enabled us to

continue refining the product. I'm really proud of how our team pulled this off during a very uncertain time."

Several years later, PlayStation was able to finally unveil and release the Access Controller to the public. As Zarganis explains, the feedback from user testing was immensely positive, with comments proving their designs were beneficial for physically disabled individuals. And as players continue to test the Access Controller themselves, he's excited to see what the public creates to further benefit from their needs.

No piece of hardware or software is a perfect solution for any disabled individual. And that's ultimately beneficial for companies like Microsoft and PlayStation. As disabled players continue to provide feedback and develop their own unique setups, companies can innovate on future products to better suit others. For Bryce Johnson, that's the beauty of design. Every piece of hardware can be used to reinvent existing hardware, educate others on the importance of accessibility, or create new accessible tools.

"I am always just extremely thrilled when anyone does anything," Johnson says. "I'm genuinely intrigued at all the approaches that people have. What's been great about the past few years, whether it's major companies like us or PlayStation, but also what companies like Logitech has done, 8BitDo has done – you can see a device and go 'I know where they are coming from,' and you can celebrate that." ■

10-24
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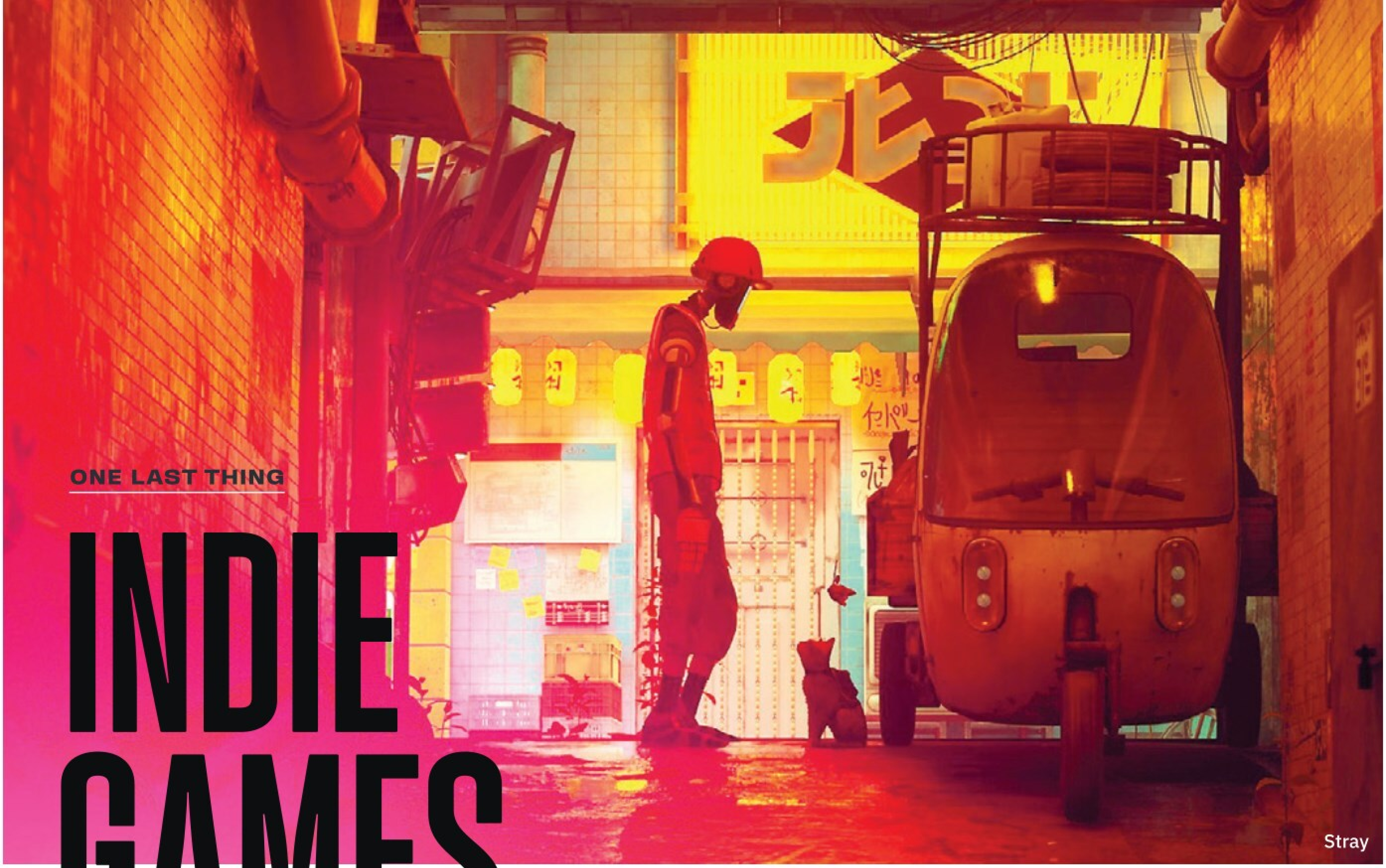
Stray

ONE LAST THING

INDIE GAMES THE MOVIES

FILM AND TELEVISION ADAPTATIONS of video games are incredibly popular right now, and thankfully, after years of mediocre entertainment, we're finally starting to get some good ones. There are big ones that we're all aware of – seasons two of *Fallout* and *The Last of Us* are moving along, Wes Ball, *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes* director, is making a Zelda movie – but there are many others based on smaller games that you may not be aware of. It's also worth noting that this is far from a comprehensive list, and the film industry is fickle. There is no guarantee these films will cross the finish line, but we're hopeful they will. BY KYLE HILLIARD

IRON LUNG

In the indie horror game you are a death row prisoner piloting a claustrophobic submarine through an ocean of blood on an alien moon. The premise is terrifying, and the film is being directed by YouTube Mark "Markiplier" Fischbach with the full cooperation and creative input of the game's creator, David Szymanski.

FIREWATCH

We haven't received an update on this adaptation in some time, but a film based on the 2016 narrative indie game is supposedly in the works from the producers behind movies like *Blindspotting* and *You're Next*.

STRAY

The sci-fi video game about a cat stranded in an underground robot city is getting the animated treatment from the studio behind *Nimona*.

DREDGE

The pitch from production company Story Kitchen for Dredge is ambitious but does line up with the game: "Think *The Sixth Sense* on the water. A grounded atmospheric cosmic horror blend of HP Lovecraft and Ernest Hemingway."

EL PASO, ELSEWHERE

Developer Strange Scaffold's Max Payne-inspired vampire shooter had a great style and enough story that we could imagine it on a big screen. LaKeith Stanfield (*Atlanta*, *Knives Out*) is attached to star.

POPPY PLAYTIME

The horror/puzzle video game has signed with Legendary Entertainment. Not specific announcements have been made yet, but Legendary (*Dune*) now has the studio live-action film and TV rights.

SIFU

The challenging kung-fu action game is working with *John Wick* creator Derek Kolstad, who will write and produce the adaptation. No directors or actors have been attached. ■

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